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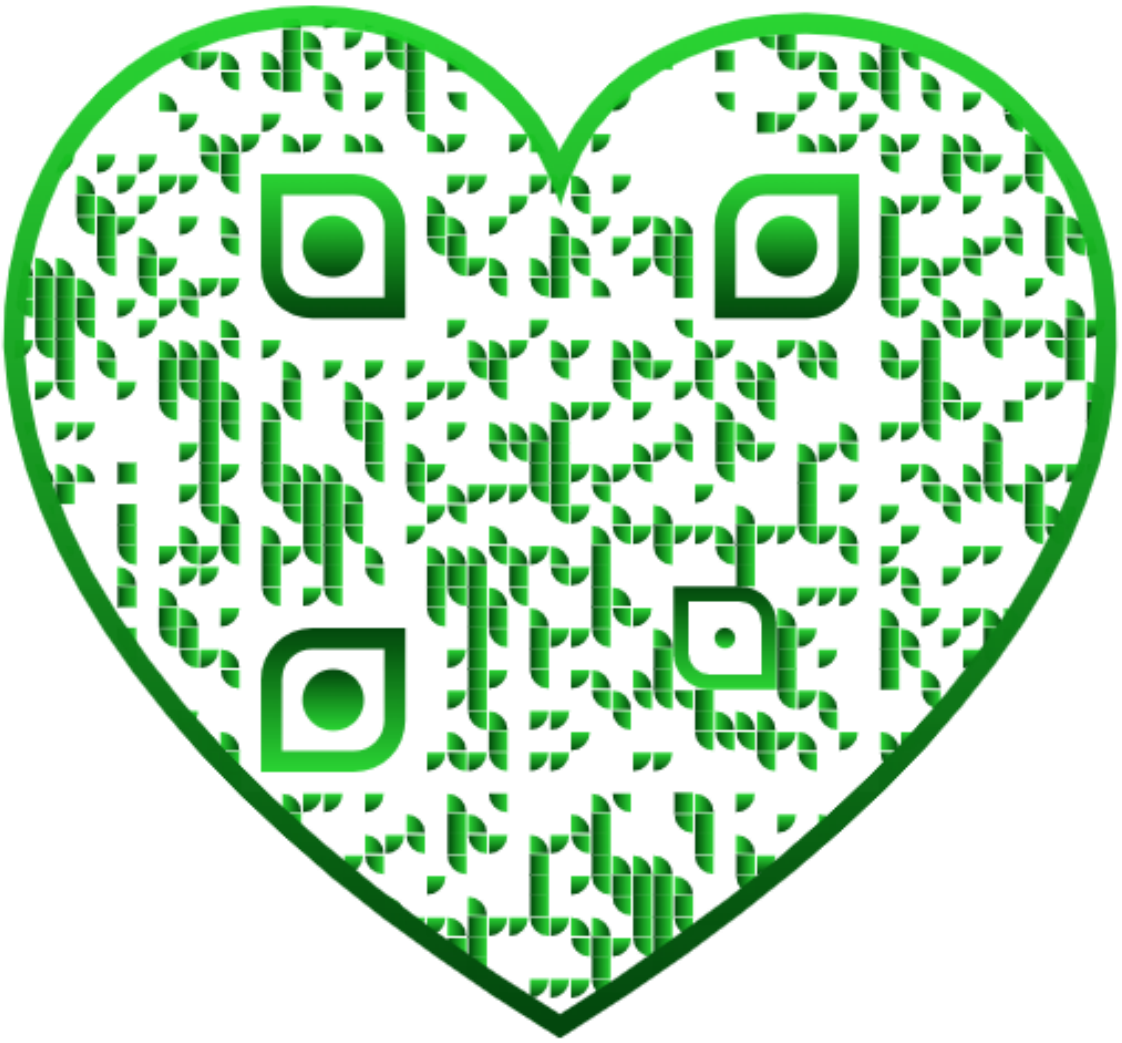
PULSE OF THE CREATOR CULTURE

Get your Beats on with rapper Srushti Tawade and digital creator Niharika NM as they talk about breaking barriers, conquering creative blocks, and staying real



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By Rolling Stone India

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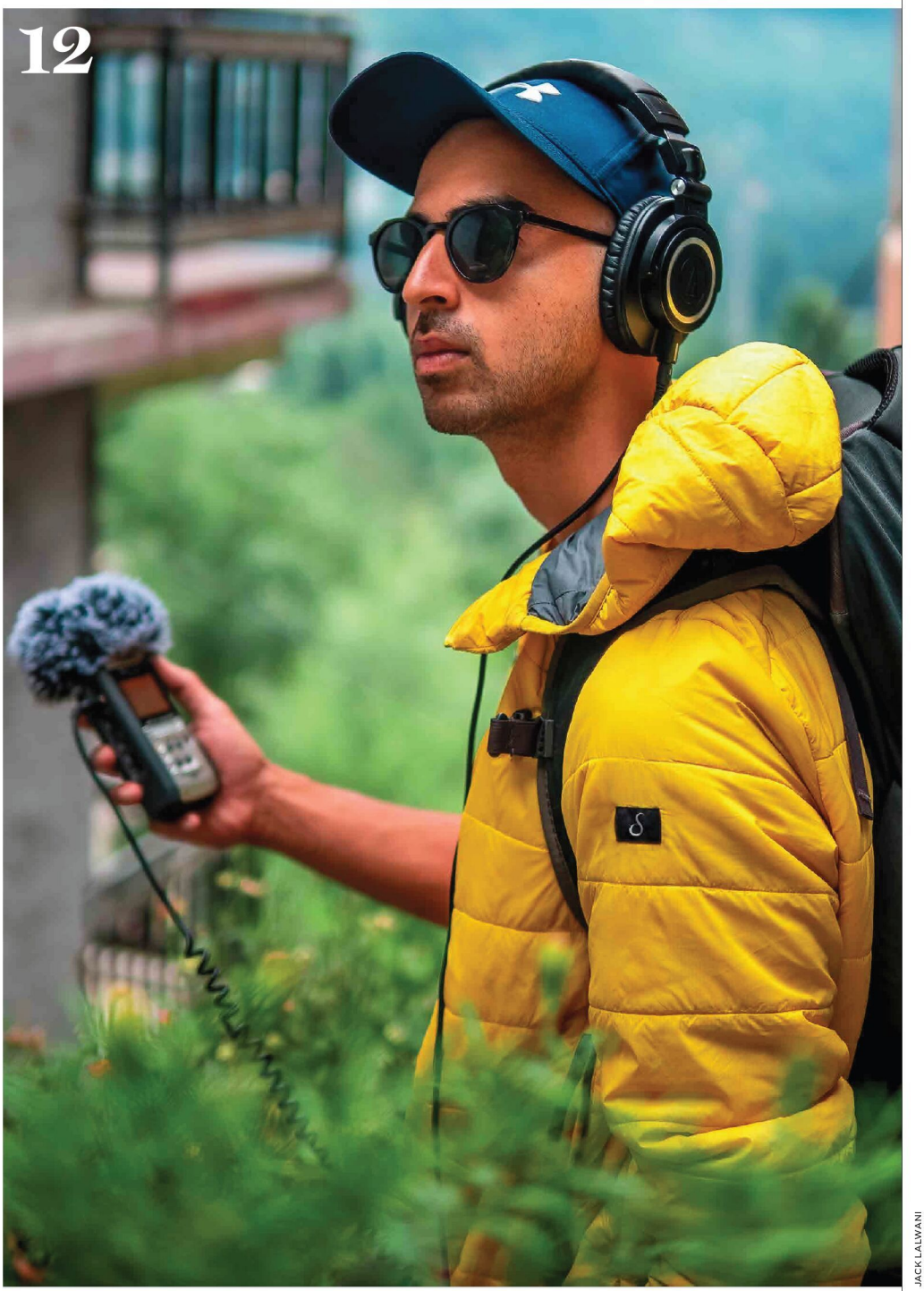

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Correspondence

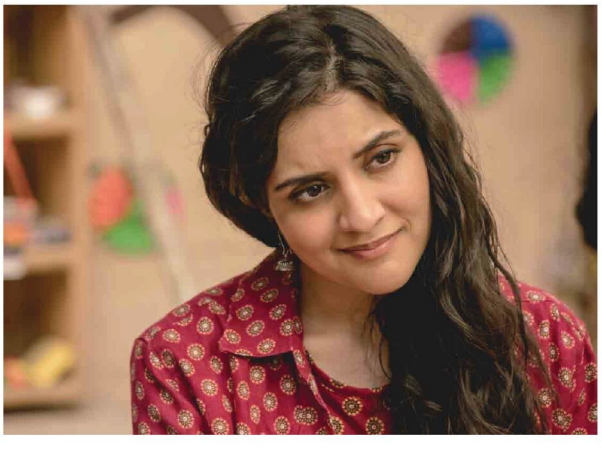
+ LOVE LETTERS & ADVICE

Learning about how he [Ikka] has cemented his position as one of the top rappers in India is truly inspiring.

— Tanay Kolade

Takeaways From Ikka

It is excellent that Indian hip-hop is now at the forefront of music in our country. Artists like Ikka are deserving of their success, and it has been amazing to read his story. Learning about how he has cemented his position as one of the top rappers in India, his Jamnapar legacy and how family is very important to him is truly inspiring.



SPOTLIGHT

Utsavi Jha Behind the Screen

Learning about how singer-songwriter Utsavi Jha is expanding herself as an artist by acting in the film 'Gulmohar' is quite interesting. Reading about how she got the role in the film, what she learned from the whole process and sharing screen space with others made for a fine read.

- Indranil Anand

Shreya Jain's Rise

Singer-songwriter Shreya Jain's rise to the top is quite remarkable. From her days in Nagpur learning Indian classical music to releasing her own songs and most recently starring in 'Disco Dancer – The Musical,' Jain is an artist that is definitely going to grow bigger as time goes by.

- Unnati Sharma

Indian Ocean Are Back

As a massive Indian Ocean fan, I couldn't be happier to learn that the band will be releasing a new album. Their new song off the album "Jaadu Maaya" is a fantastic piece of music. I'm looking forward to the whole album as well as catching the band live soon.

- Santosh Shetty

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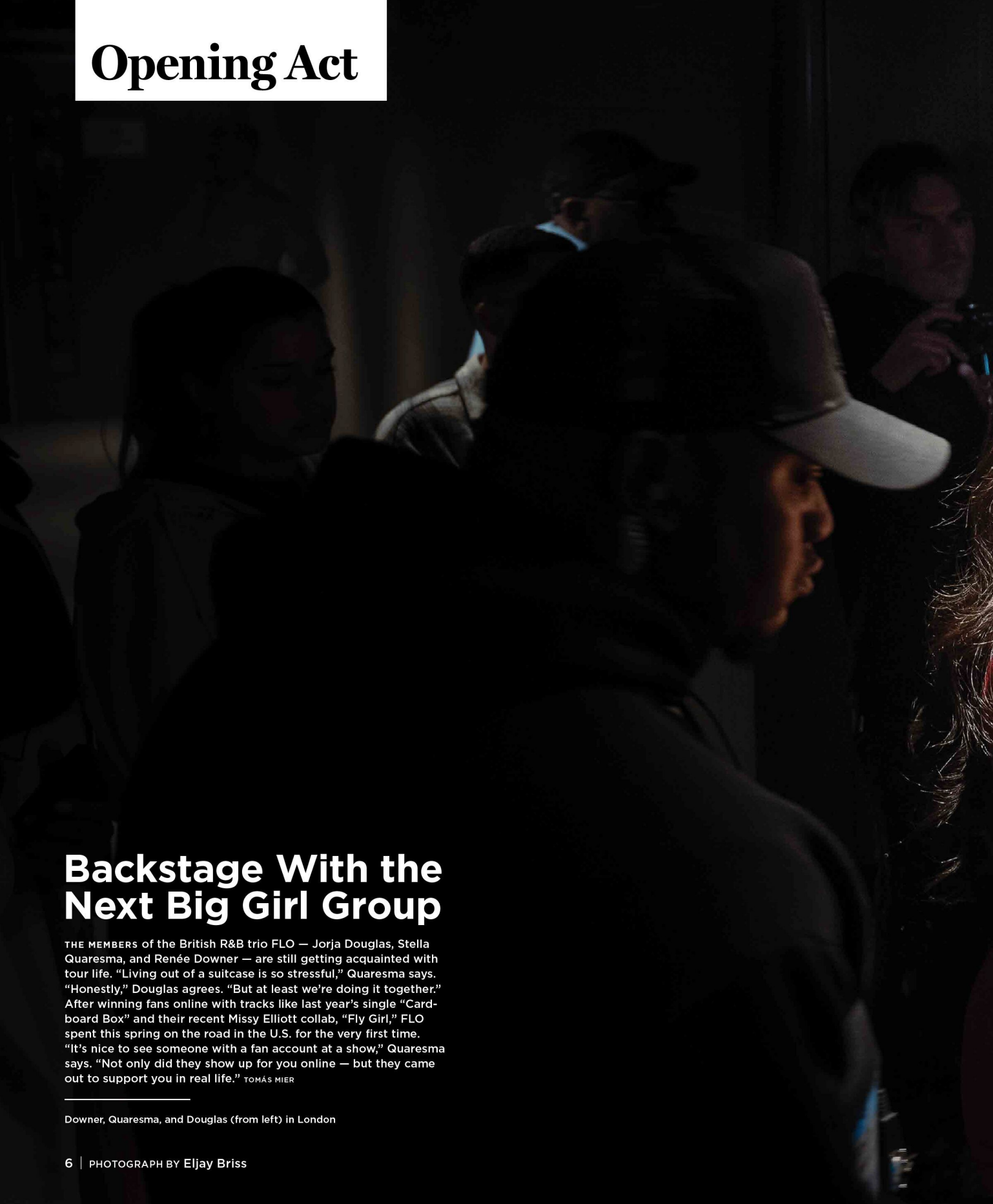


Backstage With the Next Big Girl Group

THE MEMBERS of the British R&B trio FLO — Jorja Douglas, Stella Quaresma, and Renée Downer — are still getting acquainted with tour life. "Living out of a suitcase is so stressful," Quaresma says. "Honestly," Douglas agrees. "But at least we're doing it together." After winning fans online with tracks like last year's single "Cardboard Box" and their recent Missy Elliott collab, "Fly Girl," FLO spent this spring on the road in the U.S. for the very first time. "It's nice to see someone with a fan account at a show," Quaresma says. "Not only did they show up for you online — but they came out to support you in real life." TOMÁS MIER

Downer, Quaresma, and Douglas (from left) in London

The Fix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S N

You've Never Heard Kesha Like This

Her new album is full of unfiltered anger, grief, and insecurity: 'I really dug into my uglier emotions'

PHOTOGRAPHS BY Magdalena Wosinska

KESHA

Kesha says her thirties are all about self-exploration.

Kesha was on the verge of a panic attack in the spring of 2020, when her aging cat Mr. Peeps brought over her headphones. She'd been spiraling a lot back then, her anxiety mounting as the pandemic shut down the music industry, but she took her cat's gesture as a sign that it was time to meditate. And in the midst of a guided meditation she'd done many times before, something shook loose.

"I had this really beautiful, scary, and intense spiritual awakening where it felt like I was talking to my highest self, or God, whatever word you want to say," she recalls. Three years later, she's reclining on pristine white sheets with Mr. Peeps beside her at her L.A. home, dressed in simple white leisurewear with her hair in a messy topknot. "I fully thought I was having a mental breakdown. I called my therapist and my doctor. They all were like, 'Oh, you had a spiritual awakening. Yay! Good job.'"

The next day, she wrote a song titled "Eat the Acid," in which she recounted that night, plus some clutch advice from her mother: "Do whatever you want in your life, but don't eat acid, because when you eat acid, you see things that you'll never be able to unsee."

At the time, she didn't think the song would ever see the light of day, but in the end, that track became the genesis of her fifth studio album, *Gag Order,* out now. The album was produced by Rick Rubin, a fellow Pisces who bonded with Kesha over the spirituality that she'd tapped into while *not* dropping acid.

"I feel like I'm giving birth to the most intimate thing I've ever created," the singer says, sounding as jittery as a high school student at her first recital. It's a stark contrast to the Ke$ha of 2012, who cheekily extolled the virtues of the "lady-wang" to Rolling Stone (sample sentence: "My lady-wang is becoming increasingly moist by the minute"). Gone is the bravado, the "fuck it" attitude; Kesha is laying it all bare, and she seems genuinely nervous about the world seeing this side of her. "I really dug into some of my uglier emotions and sides of myself that are less fun," she adds. "It's scary being vulnerable. The fact that I have compiled an entire record of these emotions, of anger, of insecurity, of anxiety, of grief, of pain, of regret, all of that is so nerve-racking — but it's also so healing."

You probably think you know Kesha by now. Whether it's Ke$ha, the 22-year-old who boasted about brushing her teeth with a bottle of Jack back in 2009, or Kesha at 30, who ostensibly grew up and found herself on 2017's *Rainbow,* which came a few years after she checked into a treatment center for mental-health issues and an eating disorder. Thirty-six-year-old Kesha is yet another evolution — which makes sense, because as she says, her twenties were "strange and interesting," while her thirties have been about self-exploration. "I wrote 'TiK ToK,' and 'the party don't start 'til I walk in,' so I almost felt like I was becoming a caricature of this toxic positivity," she says. "We live in a culture where I feel like we always show our best side. But Rick Rubin created the most beautiful, safe space for me to really dive into these emotions."

While *Rainbow* and its follow-up, 2020's *High Road,* feature both introspective songs and tracks perfect for getting amped before going out, *Gag Order* is a true about-face. There's not much to dance to here, but there's plenty to chew on. "Living in My Head," which Kesha says she wrote in the middle of another panic attack, is a painful listen in the tradition of John Lennon's "Cold Turkey." "Every time I listen to 'Living in My Head,' I just want to curl up in a ball and hide," she says.

"Fine Line" comes the closest to addressing her current legal predicament, which, of course, is echoed in the title of the album. "I feel as if there has been an implied gag order for a very long time now," she says. "With my ongoing litigation hanging over my head, I have not been able to speak freely because I know everything I say is scrutinized." Kesha first filed suit against her producer and label owner Dr. Luke in 2014, alleging an extended period of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse and attempting to extricate herself from her contract. Luke, real name Lukasz Gottwald, countersued that same year, vehemently denying all of her allegations and claiming that the singer had defamed him. A judge dismissed Kesha's claims in 2016, largely on the grounds that they were too old, but Luke's defamation suit continues to this day, despite several appeals. That case is set to go to trial this summer.

Kesha's anger is palpable in "Fine Line," in which she rants at "all the doctors and lawyers [who] cut the tongue out of my mouth," culminating with the line "But hey, look at all the money we made off me." It's a striking statement, given that this reportedly could be the last LP in her contract with Dr. Luke's Kemosabe Records. It's also a way for her to get a word in edgewise before the trial. (Prior to the interview, Rolling Stone was instructed not to ask Kesha about the trial since the case is still pending, and her team could not confirm the status of her contract.)

There's a lot of fight on this record, with Kesha comparing herself to a demon on more than one track. It's also got its share of pain and loss: She wrote "Too Far Gone," she reveals, after ending her secret engagement to a boyfriend she won't name, who she says is still a friend.

Spirituality has always been a constant in Kesha's music, even in her wilder *Warrior* days. But on *Gag Order,* it's woven into the fabric of every song: The late *Be Here Now* author and guru Ram Dass gets a whole interlude (an ex gave her a copy of the book while she was in rehab), Indian philosopher Osho is sampled on "All I Need Is You," and Oberon Zell, an 80-year-old wizard she met while making her podcast *Kesha and the Creepies,* appears on the last song, "Happy," proclaiming: "Sometimes, you think you're doing the magic, and sometimes you realize the magic is doing you."

Most of all, love is a constant on this album — love of her family, love of herself, love of her cats, and sheer love of music. After spending some time at a studio in Hawaii, Kesha and Rubin recorded most of the record at his studio, Shangri-La, in Malibu, where she would often hear Neil Young playing guitar across the canyon as the waves crashed below. "It was the most beautiful experience I've ever had in my entire life," she says. "I would just sit and listen, legitimately having happy tears roll down my face." BRENNA EHRLICH

FAST FACTS

CAT FANCY
The bittersweet love song "All I Need Is You" isn't about her ex, as you might guess — it's about Mr. Peeps, who had a near-death experience last year. Kesha says he's "the true love of my life."

FAMILY AFFAIR
Kesha's eight-year-old niece Luna features on the album, reading a quote from a Fifties LSD experiment. "When Luna sees her aunt's name calling on my phone, she often grabs it and runs off to talk with her auntie for hours," Kesha's brother Lagan says. "I'm so happy to see another generation get into the mix."

HAIR BY HOLLY MILLS AT THE WALL GROUP. MAKEUP BY SANDY GANZER AT FORWARD ARTISTS. STYLING BY TIA-ADAMA MILLER. PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE BY COLLA STUDIOS. PRETTY LITTLE BIRD JUMPSUIT BY WALLS OF MALIBU. JEWELRY BY MARIELA. JEANS BY LEVI'S. JACKET BY THE FRANKIE SHOP. THIS PAGE: JACKET BY GIULIVA HERITAGE.

Gauley Bhai's 'Aunty Ko Tato Bagaicha' Is Surreal Yet Grounded in Stark Realities

The Kalimpong/Kozhikode rock band have released their first new material since 2019's full-length album 'Joro'

Bengaluru-based rock act Gauley Bhai's latest music video for "Aunty Ko Tato Bagaicha (Aunty's Warm Garden)" puts the political, ecological and psychological impact of the Teesta river area in West Bengal is at the center with a day-in-the-life music video.

Directed by Gauley Bhai's violinist-vocalist Veecheet Dhakal with a script by Angarika G and cinematography by Eric Shrestha, the video plays out like a short film set along the Teesta Highway region and features a strange creature – dubbed Alakatre the Tar Phantom – that their lead cast (also musicians known as the Teesta Troupers) Manoj aka MJ Humble, Asis aka Sound of Streets, Anil aka Mr. Anix, Saugat aka Zayn encounter.

The video is described by the director as being "rooted in the everyday reality" and he's been "personally researching the infrastructural changes in the area for several years." In the face of dams, highways and railway work, the Teesta region is no longer the refuge it was for its people. "Broadly, the video reflects the deteriorating landscape in the background, and we have the boys moving through it, as the center of the narrative. In spite of the difficulties of everyday life, we wanted to capture their agency, their resistance and their playfulness," Veecheet adds.

They found their cast after Gauley Bhai's Veecheet, guitarist Siddhant Mani Chettri and bassist Anudwatt Dhakal (all from Kalimpong) set up a jam space for artists in the region and saw the creation of the Teesta Troupers. The video is dedicated to Siddhant Tamang aka Real Talk, who was one of the first key people to come on board the Teesta Trouper project and helped develop the groundwork for the Teesta Troupers. Veecheet adds, "The most acute tragedy was when unfortunately just two months before the project kicked off, Siddhant lost his life by suicide."

"Broadly, the video reflects the deteriorating landscape in the background, and we have the boys moving through it, as the center of the narrative," says Veecheet.

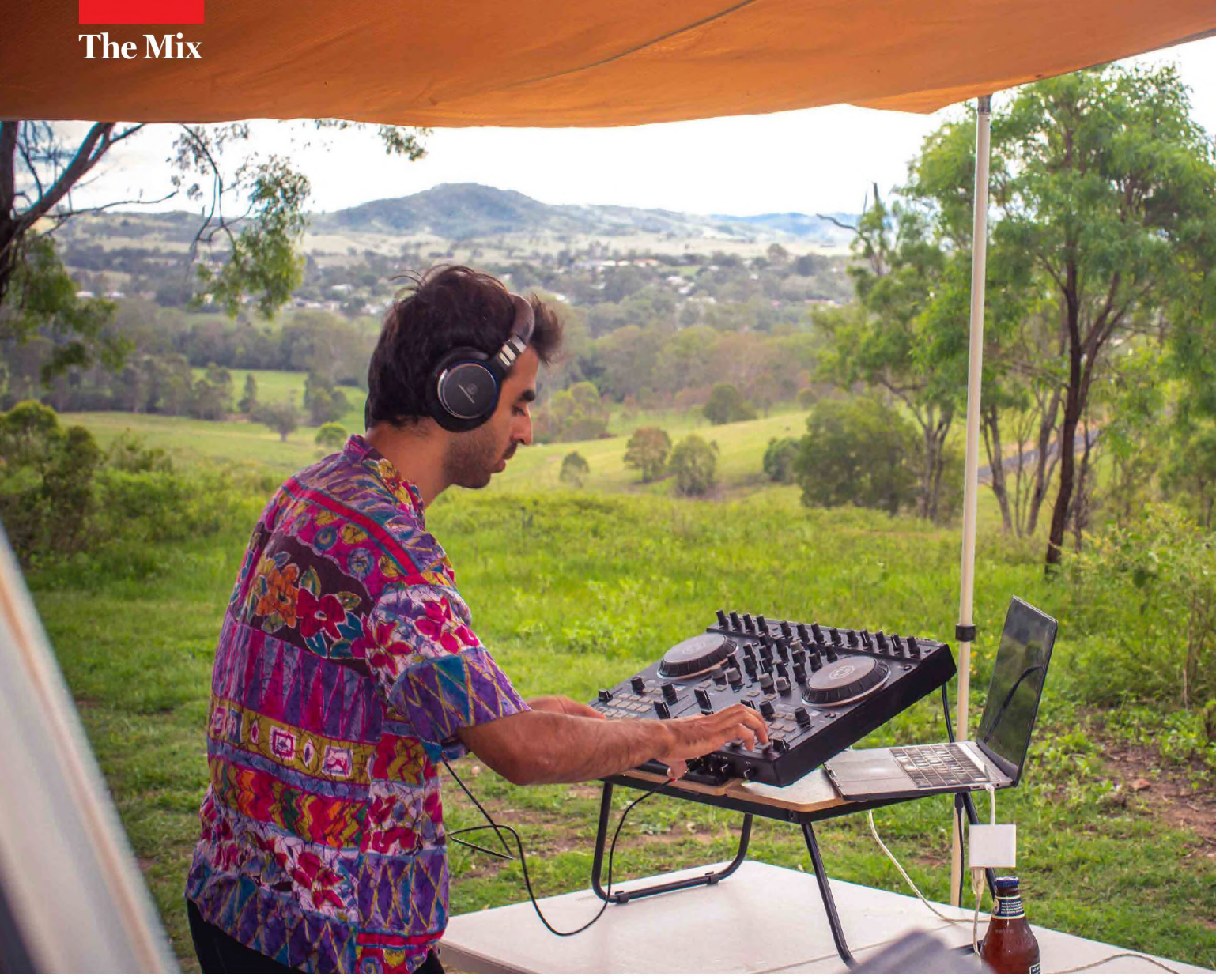
The cast bypass the highway and into a raft on the river and roam on the beach before finding an old archway gates and ruins of a bridge, all built in the 1930s by the British. With Gauley Bhai's groovy, violin-aided Nepali folk and Afro-informed rock, things melt into a dissonant kind of jazz-inspired section as the Teesta Troupers encounter a spectral black mass engulfing their surroundings. Featuring animation by Sowmya Swaminathan, scriptwriter Angarika says, "The Tar Phantom emerges from a hallucinatory reality, which really intended to capture the psychology of living within this forming/breaking landscape."

Gauley Bhai's music has often been tied to their memories of the Teesta. Lyrically, however, the song weaves in metaphors of escapism and nature, invoking bees and flowers but also reminds us of certain things that can't be changed but still confronting reality.

"Aunty Ko Tato Bagaicha (Aunty's Warm Garden)" follows Gauley Bhai's 2019 album *Joro* and lives up to their powerful visual stories, as seen in the videos for songs like "Simrayo" and "Morau." The band spent some time away in different cities due to the pandemic, but are now back in Bengaluru and readying new music. "It took us a while to find the consistency we need to create work. But now we are back in the city, back at our studio, gearing up for the next album," drummer Joe Panicker says.

Bassist Anudwatt says they hope to release more singles through 2023 and will compile it all into their second album. There's a new direction, which the band credits to having sound engineer Samuel Amulraj in the fold. Anudwatt adds, "Let's just say that if *Joro* was born from an innocence, the next album is a journey toward experience." **ANURAG TAGAT**

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



MARIA BUEMI

Diveakssh Schae's Debut Album 'Moments of Clarity' Is A Sojourning Story of Melodies

The 16-track record has been composed by the artist through his travels across Australia and India

Diveakssh Schae counts himself as a real-life Mowgli having grown up in the jungles of Dandeli in South India. Schae would eventually turn into an audio nomad, creating music while embracing nature at the same time. While schooling in Kodaikanal, Schae began experimenting with DJ software. He says, "I was fascinated with how I could stretch, reverse, and wrangle sounds in ways I'd never heard before." After moving to Australia, he learned how to use digital audio workstation Ableton.

Now, Schae is out with his debut 16-track record entitled *Moments of Clarity*, which he composed while traveling across Australia and India. In this interview with *Rolling Stone India*, Schae talks to us about how the album came together, what he hopes people take away from it and more.

When did this idea to create a nomadic-style recording for your debut album come about?

After five years of working a job in Australia which had nothing to do with music, I started to get disillusioned. In 2020, I returned home to India, and one day had a moment of clarity, it felt like the music I had been suppressing just couldn't wait any longer. I asked myself, "If I can do anything in this life, what would it be?" In that moment, I decided to leave what I knew behind to chase my love for music production.

The initial plan was to move to L.A. to study at Beat Lab Academy. However, the pandemic blocked that from happening. Instead, a series of events led me to discovering van life. I realized I could learn and create against a backdrop of everywhere.

The album's title, *Moments of Clarity*, came to me in a lucid dream. It felt like an apt way to describe the awakening which kickstarted the journey to pursue my dreams. I had other similar moments following this awakening, so the name stuck. In 2021, my campervan Spoons and I headed into the wild to unlock the music that was stuck inside me.

Tell me about the process of how you stitched everything together.

On the road, you have to work with what you have. There were two distinct phases to the creation process. The first was composing the album while living in Spoons, my beloved campervan turned mobile home and portable music studio. Most of the drums in my album are made from the sounds of this 34-year-old creature. I slammed her doors, tapped rhythms on her steering wheel and sampled it all. This is why she's the hero of the album, and is featured on the album art.

I traveled with her across Queensland, Australia to find the perfect spot to compose in creative isolation. I'm lucky to say I found it by the banks of Lake Tinaroo, in the Atherton Tablelands.

In 2022, I sold Spoons and returned to India with the bones of the album. Downsizing my music studio and belongings allowed me to fit my life into Mukti, my 55-litre Osprey backpack. Together, we set off to mix and master the album against the landscapes of Himachal Pradesh, Ladakh, Auroville, and Kodaikanal.

"Each track on the album is based on true and personal stories about the awakening I experienced and the events that surrounded it."

What can you tell me about the songs specifically and what they mean to you?

Each track on the album is based on true and personal stories about the awakening I experienced and the events that surrounded it. In my travels through Australia, I had a life-changing encounter with Charlie, an indigenous Elder of his tribe. I've included an audio story of it on the album. He taught me that their tribes have been sharing stories through sound for generations. Through this experience, I stopped trying to write tracks and instead started telling my stories through music.

For instance, 'Platform 1' is about a moment just before my awakening, when I dreamed back to my roots in Dandeli while crossing the road in Australia. It includes sounds of the Indian train, contrasted with the sharp call of the Australian pedestrian crossing.

'Blessings in Disguise' is about how problems I faced when leaving my world behind to chase music actually dissolved into solutions. One example is how the pandemic blocking my plans to move to the U.S. instead gave way to van life. So again, it has voiceovers that tell parts of this story.

What do you hope listeners take away from the album?

My intention with *Moments of Clarity* is to inspire those that are taking a leap of faith to pursue what they truly want to do in this lifetime. It's humbling to see it start to spark conversations around this topic. I've heard from listeners how the title track has motivated them to back their conscious change of direction. Or how 'epilogue' has complemented their celebrating the completion of a journey.

Soon, I'm going to be sharing full-length videos that share the story behind each track unfolding in sync with the music. After that, I plan to create a podcast that interviews others that left a set path to chase their dreams, scored by pieces from the album.

Apart from this, I've enrolled with Ari's Take Academy to learn digital marketing and playlist-pitching skills to help my album attract ears outside of my organic reach. **DAVID BRITTO**

Bhushitendu

New Delhi's Sijya: 'I Was Coming From a Place of Being Frustrated with Gatekeeping'

Following the release of the singer-producer's debut EP 'Young Hate' last year, a remixes EP called 'Young Love' is out now via London's Accidental Records

SIJYA GUPTA HAS HAD TO DEAL WITH mother nature quite a bit when she's been booked for outdoor stages in the recent months following her late 2022 debut EP *Young Hate*. The same month as the release of her spectral, shapeshifting electronic, experimental six-track EP, Sijya performed live at Magnetic Fields Festival in Rajasthan and that was fine.

It was however at the New Delhi leg of SAUCE festival in March that rain jinxed her soundcheck and led to an indoor performance. Ironically, Sijya went into that gig asking for cooling on stage for her laptop since soundcheck was at noon. And then it rained. At the Mumbai edition, the singer-producer was right next to the sea. "There was so much wind blowing, I literally felt like I was going to be blown away. I was completely overtaken by that." Later on, at the next gig on home ground in the capital, Sijya was supporting U.K. electronic-jazz act The Cinematic Orchestra. "During my soundcheck, I set up and there was a sandstorm. I had to pack everything. It's been actually quite stressful," she says over a video chat.

Following a whirlwind half-year of promoting *Young Hate* with videos and gigs (she's only played one club gig so far), there's now a remixes EP called Young Love, both out via London's lauded Accidental Records. At the moment, she's likely to take a bit of a break from live shows. "I want to reassess how and what this live thing is and it is taking a lot out of me too, because I have to rehearse a lot. I have to rehearse for at least a week before I go on because I'm not a trained singer," the artist says.

After all, music wasn't Sijya's main gig – she's a freelance graphic designer. That explains some of the intriguing art that colors her social media announcements and the treatment she gave to her music videos off *Young Hate*. One of the main influences for the themes and aesthetic choices as a singer-producer on the EP was how she felt like an outsider in the design industry. She adds a disclaimed that "it is reductive to kind of bring it down to one thing" in terms of what the EP was going for. She, however, adds, "I was coming from a place of just being very hateful and frustrated with gatekeeping and industries in general. And it wasn't so much in the music industry, actually, because I wasn't a part of the music industry. It was more in the design community that I felt a bit ostracized and just annoyed."

BHUSHITENDU

(Clockwise from top) Apurva Jadhav; The Moneta; Abhishek Shukla

"I was coming from a place [on the EP] of just being very hateful and frustrated with gatekeeping and industries in general, says Sijya.

Sijya pauses her and then adds, "Wow, I don't think I've articulated that before." Sure, the songs don't *sound* hateful, because they're wrapped in ambient and a tinge of trip-hop, but Sijya says she did imbue an "outsider aesthetic." In the works through most of 2020, the artist had reached out to plenty of labels but then Boxout.fm released "Have to Make My Bed" in 2021 as part of their compilation *Suchi Selects*, put together by Oslo-born, London-raised Indian-origin DJ-producer Suchi.

Now, with the *Young Love* remixes, she reached out to her own friends and artist discoveries she made from being part of Accidental Records. Producers like Dolorblind ("Stonefruit") and A Temporary Matter ("Tell Me") have been friends, while she loved the music put out by Rounak Maiti and reached out to him for a remix of "Clear." Another remix of "Tell Me" comes from producer Pale Blue Dotter, whom Sijya has been at clubs and is about to release her own stuff too. Through the label, Swiss producer Yanik Soland became an Internet friend and hopped in for a remix of "52." Dominic Voz remixes "Another Thing," as part of a remix swap agreement with Sijya and she's all praise for Crewdson joining the lineup. "He's this incredible guy who makes his own instruments and he has these albums that he's made with instruments that he's made. They're just absolutely stunning. I love his stuff," she says.

Sijya did ask a lot more women about whether they'd take on remixes, but the response was a bit lukewarm. She says with full sincerity, "I did ask a lot of people that said no, and a lot of them were women. So I mean, I think that's good in that they were busy and they had better things to do, so I'm happy for them."

As Sijya plots her next move while also slowing down, she hints that her next material might be more "songwriterly" in terms of approach. She adds, "I was hoping for a couple of singles this year, but I'm listening back to them and I'm feeling like they need more time. So I'm just gonna sit and make music for a couple of months." ANURAG TAGAT

Varijashree Venugopal Looks Back at 25 Years in Music, Plots Fusion Album

The vocalist, composer and flautist has worked with New York-bred Snarky Puppy bandleader Michael League for her debut LP, featuring songs in Kannada and English

For Carnatic and fusion artist Varijashree Venugopal, the idea of a thanksgiving concert to mark 25 years since her first classical performance as a solo artist came from her father, Carnatic artist H.S. Venugopal. "It marks where I come from, which is Carnatic music. That's the language that I have trained and have been training in. And that is how I approach any other music that I listened to or any other collaborations coming from any part of the world," she says.

We're seated in an open-air café in a suburban part of south Bengaluru, where Varijashree has spent all her life, in the midst of encouraging parents, gurus and Carnatic music patrons. A few of them were in the audience on May 17th, at the thanksgiving concert where the artist performed alongside go-to accompanying musicians such as percussionist and mridangam artist B.C. Manjunath, violinist Mattur Srinidhi, G. Guruprasanna on kanjira, percussionist Pramath Kiran and – for the last part of her concert – harmonium player Praveen D. Rao and jazz pianist Vivek Santosh. "These are people who are close to me and it will be a small kind of journey," the artist said about the performance.

Very much a Nineties kid, Varijashree has gone on to perform with the best of both worlds in India and abroad as an artist – from Hariharan to Ricky Kej to Gino Banks, plus jazz great Victor Wooten and erstwhile German jazz-fusion act Max Clouth Clan, among others. She says, "Although I come out of that traditional school of Carnatic music, my musical course has taken a totally different direction."

She began performing at the age of four and says she still has "sparse memories" about the way she interacted with music in her early childhood, definitely remembering her first concert. "My father really put in everything he had. Like how sugarcane juice is made, he squeezed and pushed until the last drop to get everything he could for me," she says with a laugh. Among her earliest memories of learning music was developing a habit of writing notations while songs played at home or at concerts – from Hindustani classical to Carnatic to jazz-fusion act Shakti. "I think there was a different concoction happening inside my head at that time," Varijashree says. From then on, she didn't perceive music as having strict boundaries.

"The most beautiful part is that it [Carnatic music] has evolved over a period of time."

The other difference for the artist when she was younger was being fascinated with the concept of harmonies, even though Indian classical music is heavily melody-driven and has rhythms. "The only context of harmony in classical music is the *tanpura*. When I would listen to something which had a chordal movement, or harmony, I would be like, 'Okay, what's happening?' I am not trained in western classical, but it's all by hearing," she says.

How did a free-thinking, boundary-less perception match with the somewhat rigid, guarded and traditional systems of Indian classical music? Varijashree acknowledges that the rules are what define a system and a classical art form. Theory came after practice, but it was in place to "protect the form." She adds, "At the same time, the most beautiful part is that it has evolved over a period of time. How people would sing Carnatic music 200 years ago, if it is sung the same way today, maybe it is not the best way to enjoy that. So it was evolved and it's getting finer with time."

She follows it up with a simple statement of intent: "I've always wanted to fly. I want to go deeply into one form, but then after that I just wanted to do whatever is possible on an application level on this format." That explains why Varijashree adapted John Coltrane or Chick Corea solos to vocals and cites the likes of Bobby McFerrin and Al Jarreau as influences right from her teens, making discoveries via YouTube. "Your voice is capable of doing all of this, if you treat it as an instrument. I started trying these things as an experiment to see what's possible," she adds.

It's been difficult to hold on where she comes from as a musician. "It's not easy but in a very good way. You need to have that anchor," she says. There are times when jazz vocals might pop into her mind when she's about to get on stage to perform a *raaga* like "Reetigowla," but Varijashree laughs it off.

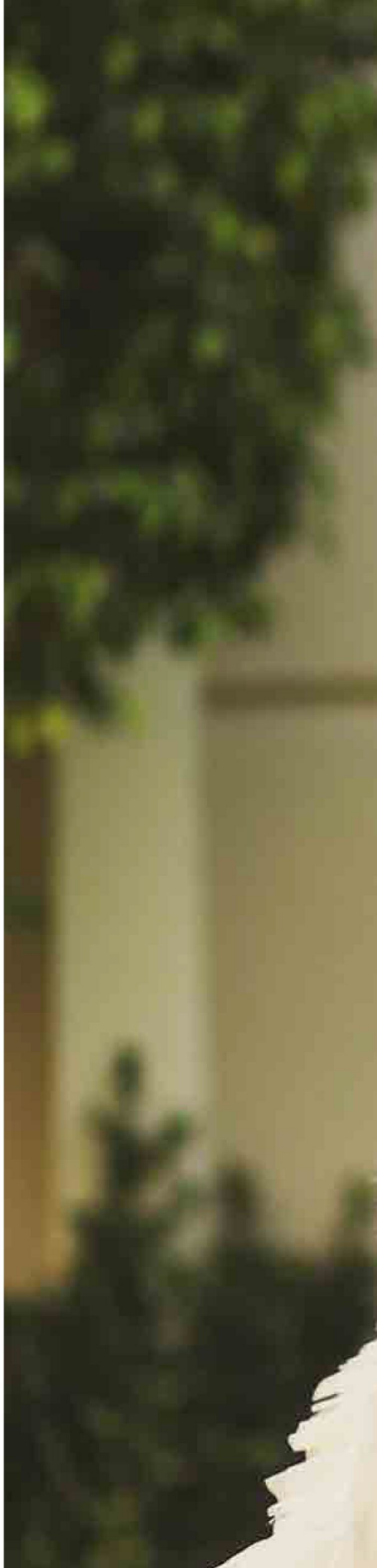
The other challenge along the way of diversifying and growing as an artist has been to show to the world that she's as much a Carnatic artist as she is a film music composer, a fusion artist or anything else. "The more that you are present, you are seen and noticed. The more they see you doing various things, the first reaction will be, 'She has moved to a different path.' But that's not true. You can branch out while being rooted," the artist says.

In the midst of collaborations with Italian veteran Riccardo Nova as well as recent concerts with France's EYM Trio, Varijashree is readying her debut album comprising original compositions, produced by multi-instrumentalist and producer Michael League (from fusion act Snarky Puppy). It's always been on her mind and she met League in New York through common friends about eight years ago. "There was this album that I had in mind and he said, 'Vari, let's do it.' We met a couple of times in New York to make demos and see where the tunes are going. And then COVID happened. So I got delayed quite a bit," she says.

In addition to not just composing her own songs, Varijashree also began writing lyrics for the first time in Kannada and English for the album. It's ready to go, but they're presently looking out for a label to pick it up and get on with promotional work like music videos. "This album is about flow and flowing beyond boundaries. It's about celebrating the very traditional sounds of Indian music, classical and folk but also going all out with how they're presented," she says of the record. **ANURAG TAGAT**

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Simantinee Roy Joins Forces with Music Label Saregama to Promote South Asian Artists in North America



Roy says, "This collaboration will offer a platform for aspiring artists and gain much-needed exposure on such a significant platform to kickstart their musical careers"

Indo-American singer Simantinee Roy recently teamed up with Indian music label Saregama to help with promoting South Asian artists in North America. In this interview with *Rolling Stone India*, Roy talks to us about how this project came to be, what it offers, future plans, and more.

How did this collaboration with Saregama come about?

Openstage was a relatively new vertical under Saregama when I first came across this initiative. From the start, it looked very encouraging, especially for those who have the talent but don't know where to start. After an initial info session with the Saregama team at their Mumbai office in December, I was confident about launching this in North America and providing this opportunity to our South Asian talents here. I thank the Saregama leadership team for joining me in launching this initiative here in collaboration with my company Spotlife Studio.

"Part of the process also includes educating and mentoring talents who might be new to this but have aspirations to become singers or recording artists."

The tagline "Kickstart your music career with Saregama Open Stage" resonated with me. North America is filled with supremely talented South Asians from all walks of life. I come across a variety of talents, whether they are South Asian children or adults. Their primary profession may not be music; they could be medical practitioners, software developers, executives in companies, or lawyers. But they pursue music intensely and passionately even after their hectic schedule, which is quite commendable.

This collaboration will offer a platform for aspiring artists to showcase their talent and gain much-needed exposure on such a significant platform to kickstart their musical careers. This collaboration with Saregama aims to provide opportunities to budding talents who wish to kickstart their music careers and turn their dreams into reality through Saregama Open Stage. The creators' shortlisted cover versions of any Saregama songs will have a chance to be featured on the Saregama Open Stage YouTube channel.

Who are the kind of artists you are targeting to work with?

We are open to all types of talent, whether you are an aspiring emerging

talent or an established musician. This initiative for North America residents is also open to anyone aged 13 and above. I have been approached by many parents about this initiative, and it would be a big platform for kids who are already pursuing music. Having their work published under the Saregama brand would be significant. I am sure they would be thrilled to showcase it in their essays.

Through this initiative, we are not limited to vocalists; we are also inviting instrumentalists and DJs who can recreate any Saregama song of their choice, regardless of the language. Residents of the United States and Canada are fortunate to have easy access to world music, legendary artists, and musicians, encompassing various genres. Through these submissions, we will likely get to hear new soundscapes, perhaps even for a Saregama song that is 40-plus years old, which may not have been imagined before. It's fascinating how you can play with those musical notes and weave a beautiful musical journey into our lives. I am eagerly looking forward to the different types of cover versions we might receive as Openstage submissions. We are encouraging talents to submit their musical work, drawing inspiration from different musical genres and subgenres.

What are the benefits or opportunities you are hoping to give to artists through this initiative?

The music industry and the musical landscape, in general, has undergone significant changes due to the rise of digital technology and the internet. The main opportunity for our aspiring and emerging talents is to have their audio and video published on Saregama's platform. Saregama is one of the oldest and largest record labels in India, with a history of nearly 120 years and an international presence. If I were a newbie with no idea how to get my song published or even where to start, I would be excited to be a part of this. Additionally, selected audio will be distributed by Saregama for digital distribution. We are also looking at various promotional campaign initiatives via Spotlife Studio as well. This initiative aims to curate a holistic artist experience from helping them through the creative process, providing valuable guidance and feedback to these talents during their studio sessions.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Has work with any artist begun already, if so could you share with who and how it is progressing?

Oh yes! We have just announced and already started working with so many talents, including a 14-year-old. We have talents from various locations, such as NJ/NY, Bay Area, Calgary, Toronto, Minneapolis, and other cities, who are in the process, or they have already submitted their musical work. The Spotlife Studio team receives several inquiries every day. I already have few submissions, they should be launched soon.

Part of the process also includes educating and mentoring talents who might be new to this but have aspirations to become singers or recording artists. As a live performer and recording artist myself, I understand the nuances of both worlds. It is very different when you are up in front of 12,000 people compared to when you are recording in a studio setting. For example, over the last few days, a particular talent has been sending me voice samples and practice sessions as she prepares to dub her vocals in the studio soon. I appreciate her sincerity and thoroughness in her preparation. It's not just her; whoever has submitted their work so far or is preparing to do so, I sense their commitment to music through their work. I also enjoy the opportunity to guide and mentor them if and when needed. This may not have been possible otherwise.

What are the future plans for the project?

I have a vision for this musical project, and I hope everything works out the way my team and I have imagined. However, I cannot do this alone. I need the support and time for South Asian talents to come forward and be part of this initiative. I ask for your help in spreading awareness so that we can take it to a larger scale. Look forward to seeing how their rendition weaves itself tightly into their identity and musical style. **DAVID BRITTO**

Niyati Handa Releases New Pop Song 'For You'

The track has been produced by Mumbai-based artist Afterall

SAURABH SRIVASTAVA

New Delhi-bred and Mumbai-based singer-songwriter Niyati Handa has a number of singles already credited to her name. Earlier this year, she released her melancholic pop track "Sohneya" and the new song by singer Shreya Sharma called "Vekh Le," which came out this week itself, has been written and composed by Handa. Not one to waste time, Handa dropped another fresh track today, the pop offering "For You," with Mumbai-based producer Afterall.

In this interview with *Rolling Stone India*, Handa talks about the new song, future plans and more. Read excerpts below:

When did your new song "For You" begin to take shape?
I wrote it around January or February this year and I started talking to Afterall, I've known him for a year. He sent me around 10 or 15 instrumental tracks and this was one which I really liked, it was very peppy and soothing. I haven't ever tried something like that.

What can you tell me about the song specifically and what it's about?
'For You' is a song that is written by observing people around me, especially couples. Every couple fights and then you care for each other and love each other. But there are fights. So the song is all about being in a relationship and going through different phases. The song is from the girls' side.

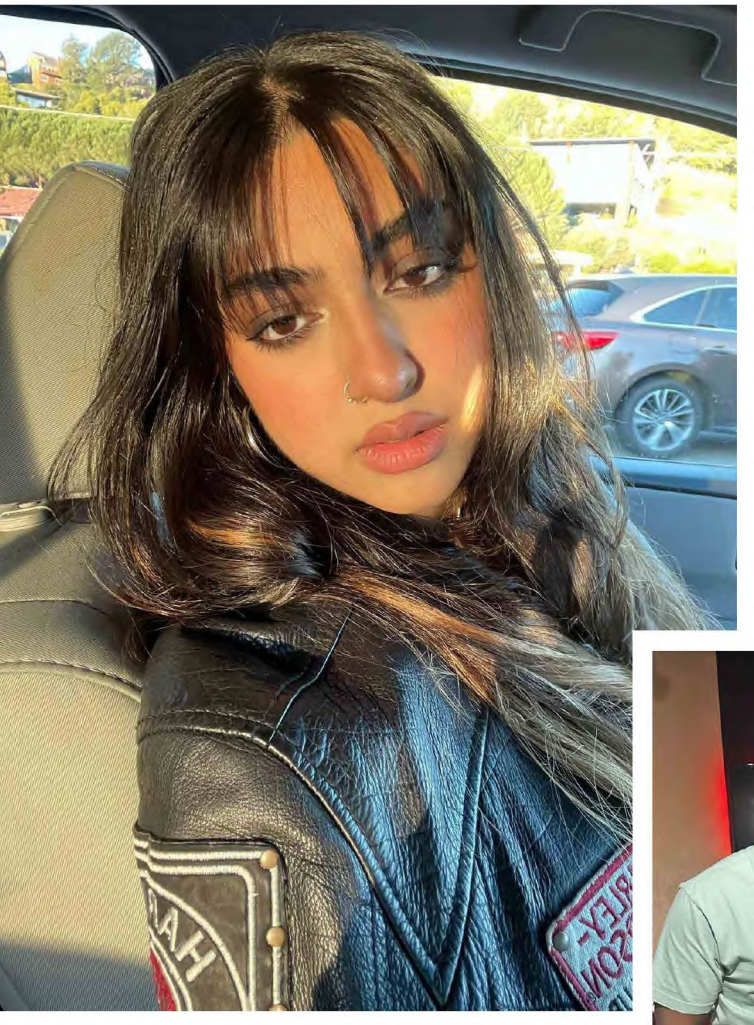
What was it like collaborating with Afterall?
He has a really cute setup at home, a small studio. So, we used to jam there and sit there and honestly writing and composing comes very naturally to me.

Is there a music video releasing too?
Yes, a visualizer. It is cute and hot at the same time. We have used a lot of red lights and blue lights to give it a very sexy and vibrant vibe.

Do you have plans to perform the song live anytime soon?
I'm waiting for at least six or seven of my originals to come out. Because honestly, I mean, I might be wrong, but I don't want to be tagged as a cover artist. So, for me, when I am performing on stage I want people to sing my songs. I want to be known for my originals.

What's next going forward?
I have around 10 more songs, which are already produced. Most of them need some investments, so I'm kind of pushing it to labels and investors.

Are you sticking to just the single game or are you planning on releasing an EP or album?
Of course, I have a plan to release an EP. I know that people still don't know me in the market. I'm still making a name for myself. I think artists should release an album when they have some good streams, and some good monthly listeners. So, when they release an album, people should know them. That's what I think. There's no point releasing so many songs together because your audience will get divided and I don't want that. DAVID BRITTO



Gurugram Singer-Songwriter NAISHA Releases Absorbing Debut Ballad 'Tell Me Dear'

The artist worked with Black Eyed Peas producer Keith Harris on the track

Harris with NAISHA at his L.A. studio.

GURUGRAM-BRED AND U.S.-BASED singer-songwriter NAISHA recently dropped her hypnotic debut single "Tell Me Dear." The track features immersive plucked guitar parts before it opens up with sonic embellishments, airy drums and NAISHA's emotive vocals. The song has been produced by U.S.-based Keith Harris (who has previously worked with the Black Eyed Peas and Estelle among others).

In this interview with *Rolling Stone India*, NAISHA and Harris talk to us about the new song, working together, future plans and more.

What led both of you to work together?

Naisha: I was introduced to Keith through a familiar friend. I set up a call with Keith, and he liked my voice and agreed to produce my first single. We traveled to L.A. and recorded my song in his studio. He is an incredible producer and has a very talented team. I loved the experience of working with Keith and learned a lot in the process.

Harris: NAISHA was recommended to me by Grammy award-winning artist Taboo of the Black Eyed Peas. He had nothing but positive words to say about NAISHA and that made me extremely excited to work with her and experience her talent.

What can you tell me about the recording process?

Harris: The recording process with NAISHA was pretty smooth. She took great direction, had a great disposition about learning, critiques, and pushed her performance to the next level by embodying and engaging with the emotion of the song.

What can you tell me about the song itself?

Naisha: My song 'Tell Me Dear' is an emotional and heartfelt ballad that tells the story of a person grappling with the pain of a broken relationship and the longing for their former lover's apology. The song was inspired by dialogue from the movie *Corpse Bride* by Tim Burton, 'Tell me, dear, can a heart still break once it's stopped beating?' This dialogue spoke volumes, and I decided to base the whole song on just one line, 'Tell me dear.' This song has many metaphors and can be interpreted in many ways by the listeners, and it has a highly catchy chorus. So, whether you're going through a heartbreak or simply appreciate a powerful ballad, 'Tell Me Dear' is a must-listen.

Will you be working on more music with NAISHA in the future?

Harris: I am looking forward to working with NAISHA, experiencing her creativity, excitement of the process, and looking forward to creating more amazing music with an amazing young talent.

What's next for both of you?

Naisha: I am working on another song currently. It has a catchy melody, and the lyrics are simple yet relatable. I am very proud of this song and excited for it to come out this year.

Harris: I am currently a producer along with Will.i.am for the theme song for this coming season of F1 Racing and touring this summer with The Black Eyed Peas in Europe.

DAVID BRITTO

COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

Rapper Logarhythm on the Challenge of Bengali Hip-Hop and His New EP 'Gangapaar'

Mainak Ghosh says some West Bengal-origin artists quit due to a lack of recognition, something he addresses on on his song "Jajabor"

From conviction to doubt and back into life-affirming bars, Kolkata-bred rapper Logarhythm aka Mainak Ghosh's new EP *Gangapaar* packs in resolute Bengali hip-hop like few others in the country.

The follow-up to his 2020 album *R.O.O.T.S* (*Rhymes On Oblivion Taped Society*), Logarhythm cuts loose and fires quick on the three-track *Gangapaar*, released via Kamani Records. The rapper says that compared to his debut album, a different soundscape was desired for the EP's songs "Amra Shobai Raja," "Jajabor" and "Lalbazar" with producer Tha Armani. That was fueled by the idea of becoming a different persona between records. The rapper says, "The Logarhythm in *R.O.O.T.S* is still an artist who is in search of himself. The story is still unexplored, he thinks twice before saying anything, thinking about the repercussions. Whereas *Gangapaar* is an altogether different project. This project is completely fearless. Here the artist is the one who says things on your face."

"Success can be quick but legacies take time. I'm here for legacy and I'll do whatever it takes," says Logarhythm.

In December last year, Logarhythm says he was struck by the narrative of talking about "daily life hustles and mental peace" of artists while working on a single. He then called up Tha Armani and shared the concept and the beats were ready in two weeks. "We didn't have any references while making it, we just had three names and I had a vibe in mind," Logarhythm adds. Beatsmith and sound engineer DRJ Sohail was called in to mix and master *Gangapaar*.

The narrative was at least partially inspired by Logarhythm's own goal to put Bengali hip-hop on the map, a movement that's seen everyone from Kolkata mainstay Cizzy to the somewhat divisive diaspora group Bhanga Bangla. Although Logarhythm envisions Bengali hip-hop to be huge in the next five years, he admits the challenge remains in terms of presenting a different language. The rapper often writes in Hindi as well, but says there are fewer investors at the moment. "All [that] is needed is breaking the stereotypes. I would like to conclude this by saying 'Success can be quick but legacies take time.' I'm here for legacy and I'll do whatever it takes," Logarhythm adds.

With music videos for "Amra Shobai Raja" and "Lalbazar" out, the rapper has more projects lined up through the year. There are singles in Bengali and Hindi, plus collaborations. "But the most important thing is my debut full-length Bengali album. It's my dream project. It has a crazy soundscape with some star-studded features and I'm really excited for it," he adds. **ANURAG TAGAT**

COURTESY OF KAMANI RECORDS

Bhrigu Sahni Collaborates with Tejas on Touching New Song 'If I Could Fly'

Both artists complement each other terrifically on the acoustic-leaning track

After releasing his immersive track "Everytime" in collaboration with vocalist Shalmali Kholgade and multi-instrumentalist Karsh Kale earlier this year, Newcastle-born and Pune-bred singer-songwriter Bhrigu Sahni has made the conscious decision to release more music. With his 2016 six-track EP *What Is Now* and a few singles already under his belt, he says, "I'd like to be one of those artists who has a lot of music out there and perhaps, in that process, get closer to finding out what my sound truly is."

Now, Sahni is out with his latest offering, the rustic and moving "If I Could Fly." After playing a rough idea of the song for a friend in Goa, the artist was told by his buddy to go ahead and finish the track. Sahni did just that while in Mumbai last year. Then, another suggestion popped up — if he would ever consider someone else singing his songs. He says, "At first, I put up a lot of resistance, being like, 'How can anyone else emote what I've been feeling.' But after listening to the song in a different light, I realized that it actually might serve the song better if I had someone else sing this."

That's when Sahni approached Mumbai-based singer-songwriter Tejas to sing on the song. Upon coaxing from Tejas and producer Zain Calcuttawala aka Bulli Bainbridge, the pair also got Sahni to duet on the track. "I'm glad they insisted. The emotion that I was holding onto came through into the song," says Sahni.

"If I Could Fly" opens with delicate acoustic guitar plucking before lush strumming is heard and a melodic guitar line kicks in just as Sahni's timber vocals chime in. Tejas then enters the fray with his silky vocals. The two singers then harmonize beautifully as both their contrasting voices sit splendidly together as strings, light drums, piano and bass fill up the sound. Sahni says, "'If I Could Fly' is a metaphor for being able to move on. I was writing as a way to be able to find closure. Personally, to be able to let go, sometimes you need to write it out. I guess that's how us musicians express the deeper things in life."

On working with Tejas, Sahni says, "I am also a big fan of how he sings." Sahni counts Calcuttawala to be a very "considerate and sensitive" producer. He says, "He hears you out, gives you ample space to be, at the same time being super on top of things." "If I Could Fly" was mastered by Mumbai engineer/producer Ayan De. "He's an absolute pleasure to work with," says Sahni.

Sahni was one of the co-composers on the just-released Coke Studio India track called "Das Main Ki Pyaar Vichon Khatteya" featuring artists Tajdar Junaid, Kanwar Grewal, Deveshi Sahgal and Amira Gill. "All thanks to [singer-songwriter/music director] Ankur Tewari on that one," he says. The singer-songwriter is also working alongside Tewari's Tiger Baby Records to help produce music for Sahgal. There's also a sophomore EP in the works and the musician says, "This really excites me the most! I have a handful of really beautiful songs and their scratches are ready." DAVID BRITTO

RADHEYA JYOTI

Karan Ghosh Teams with The Rish on Debut Pop Ballad 'Good Luck'

The song revolves around the theme of redemption

TRISHA SARANG SATHAYE

Mumbai-based musician Karan Ghosh's first tryst with music began when he began playing classical piano at the age of nine before picking up the guitar by the time he turned 14. He says, "I spent so much time on the guitar and was constantly progressing and discovering new genres." Previously part of alt-rock/prog band Alder Eye, Ghosh has now pivoted to being a solo artist. "I realized that the music I was making with my band was not easily understood by non-musicians. At the end of the day, I just wanted to be listenable," he says. Now the guitarist-composer is out with his debut solo single, the pop ballad "Good Luck," featuring The Rish on vocal duties.

Ghosh penned the new song about a year ago and explains that it revolves around heartbreak. "This was actually the first time I wrote lyrics to a song, with the help of my producer and co-writer Kabir Hiranandani," says the artist. According to the musician, he had experienced a "toxic relationship" and would find himself having very low self-esteem. "Working on this song was the only thing that gave me a sense of purpose. That made me feel good inside," says Ghosh. The artist does point out that the theme of the song is redemption and standing up for yourself. He says, "If this song can provide comfort for people the way it did for me, then I feel I have done my job as a songwriter."

"Working on this song was the only thing that gave me a sense of purpose," says Ghosh.

The track includes poignant acoustic guitar plucking, a relaxed groove, laidback vocals from The Rish as well as lush backing vocals by Dear Kokum (formerly known as k o k u m). The song also includes contributions from bassist Kamran Raza (of Mumbai hardcore band Death By Fungi) while Dishaan Gidwani mixed it and Tamzid Rahman from Mumbai's Space Cat Studios mastered it.

Ghosh is currently writing new material and is planning to start work on a few demos soon. He says, "I think I took too much time from the inception of 'Good Luck' to the release of it. This time I'm confident I'll have new music out much sooner." DAVID BRITTO

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Nepal Singer-Songwriter Ankit Shrestha Releases Rustic New Song 'Dust and Bones'

The Kathmandu native is also working on a music video for the track

KATHMANDU-BRED SINGER-SONGWRITER Ankit Shrestha's first tryst with the guitar began when he was in the fourth grade as his school offered music classes. Shrestha says, "In my assumption that they were compulsory, I ticked off the guitar. My mother then gifted me my first guitar and that would be the start of a lifelong passion."

Soon, Shrestha began learning songs from his favorite artists and used the guitar as a means to escape and connect with something greater than himself. "Music provided a sense of companionship and solace, even when I had no one else to turn to," he says. After going on to play in bands, Shrestha would eventually begin releasing his solo material. Now, he's out with his latest single in the shape of the rustic and acoustic leaning "Dust and Bones." In this interview with Rolling Stone India, the artist talks to us about the new song, the track's upcoming video, what he has in store for the rest of 2023 and more. Read excerpts:

"Over time, the song has transformed in response to my artistic growth and personal experiences."

What's the journey been like for you ever since you began releasing your own music?

Over the years, my musical journey has been a fulfilling one, I have focused on growing and evolving in both my writing and production. It all began in 2013 when I released my first single, 'The Underwater Song,' as a singer-songwriter, which allowed me to reach a wider audience in Nepal. Since then, I have released a couple of EPs and in 2020, I opted for releasing singles instead of an album.

Although my love for music was kindled during my time in Nepal where I played for a few metal bands, it wasn't until I moved to the U.S. in 2012 that I truly began to explore the indie/singer-songwriter scene. As I continued to create music on the side, I spent a decade busking in the U.S., honing my craft and building my audience.

Reflecting on my journey so far, I am grateful for the opportunities that have come my way and for the growth that I have experienced as a musician. As I continue to navigate the ever-evolving music industry, I remain committed to creating meaningful and authentic music that connects with my listeners on a deeper level.

What can you tell us about your new song "Dust and Bones"?

I actually wrote this song back in 2017, and since then it has evolved a lot both in terms of its writing and production, as well as its underlying meaning. Over time, the song has transformed in response to my artistic growth and personal experiences. Despite these changes, it remains a powerful tribute to the perseverance of the human spirit and the victory of optimism in challenging times.

Initially, the song consisted solely of vocals and an acoustic guitar, until 2021 when I began to develop pre-production ideas for the song. As the production process unfolded, I decided to produce and mix the song myself, shaping the sound and texture of the song to my liking. The final mastering touches were done by Diwas Gurung, who is one of the most skilled music producers in Nepal at present. We were fortunate enough to have Nicola D'Adamo on the drums, Hugo on the double bass, and Volodymyr Kotliarov on the cello. Each of them brought their own unique style and expertise to the table, and it was an absolute pleasure to work with them.

What can you tell me about the song's music video?

We're still in the process of working on the music video and it's been really exciting so far! We've been exploring the idea of a person pursuing something and we're trying to incorporate that theme throughout the video. I had the privilege of working on this project with two amazing friends Robin and Khusi. It's been a fantastic collaboration and I'm really happy with how everything is coming together.

What's Next?

With this release, we are trying to target the global audience and especially the South Asian community. As for what's coming up next, I have a bunch of English and Nepali songs that I'm really excited to record and hopefully release sometime this year. Right now, I am in the pre-production phase, where I'm trying to figure out what direction I want the songs to take sonically. It's a really fun and creative process, and I can't wait to share the final product with everyone! DAVID BRITTO

Ena Marley Addresses Not Being Paid for Gigs in New Song 'Where Is the Money?'

The track is off the Madrid-bred artist's forthcoming album 'Magic Jazz Masalas'

THE LAST TIME WE SPOKE TO MADRID/MUMBAI/New Delhi artist Ena Marley was in 2021 when she released her emotive track "Just Say." Since then, she's released a number of singles and also composed the music for *The Doll's House* for the National School of Drama in New Delhi.

Now, Marley is gearing up for the release of her forthcoming debut album called *Magic Jazz Masalas*. Recently, she shared the record's first single in the shape of the swing-blues song "Where Is the Money?" The artist has even released an accompanying animated music video with the song. In this interview, Marley talks to us about the story behind the song, what people can expect from the album and more. Read excerpts.

What's the journey been like for you ever since you began releasing your own music?

'Where Is the Money?' Is a song I created in 2018, after several experiences in Mumbai. Even If I like to see the funny side of certain things, I should recognize at this moment things turn out to be overwhelming. I was working every day but I didn't have any economical income, since none of the jobs were paying me, using excuse after excuse for delaying the payments. If I would stop working, it would be a justification for the institutions to finalize the engagement and somehow make things even more complicated. It was a real crisis for me since I needed to be not agreeable and defend myself with determination, something I discovered I was not really used to. You feel insecure, tired, and somehow abused. This is something that happens all around the world, especially to freelancers, but in my case, I experienced it in India in a really high dose during this period of time.

"I was working every day but I didn't have any economical income, since none of the jobs were paying me, using excuse after excuse for delaying the payments."

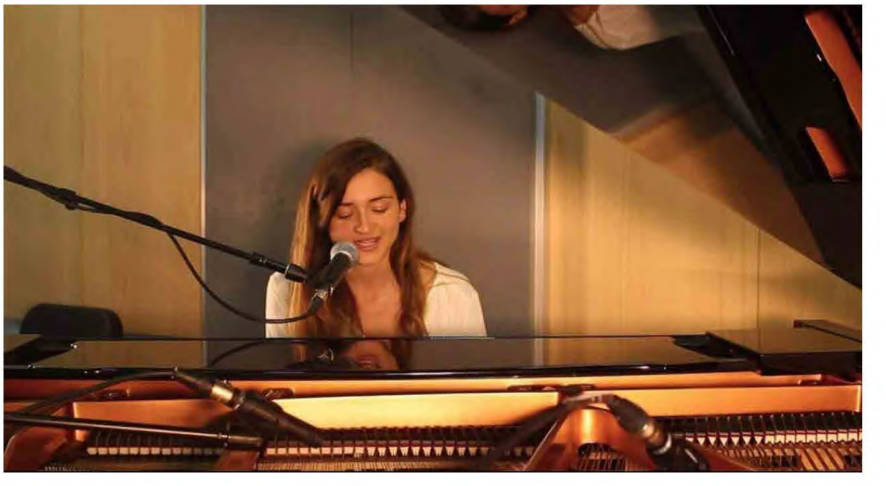
Tell me about what it was like putting the video together.

The video was hard and required a lot of execution and work, on my part and the part of Mel, the animator. This visual tale is completely handcrafted, everything has been articulated from the basics of the imagination, a pencil, and the mind. To imagine every detail, try it, re-think it, and review it constantly until we could see it was working is a hustle. The love for the craft and the visualization of the concept getting represented is the bigger motivation to get it done.

What can people expect from the album and when is it going to be out?

This new album *Magic Jazz Masalas* is a combination between original easy jazz-folk songs written in Spanish, and jazz songs with little stories of India. The next single of this album is called 'A Foggy Day in Delhi Town' based on the Gershwin composition but applied to the foggy city of Delhi. But there are other ones like 'I Should Switch Off the Phone" about the overuse of mobile phones and the disconnection between individuals, or 'Hola!' about the creation of personas or avatars to interact with people in the most well-accepted manner, avoiding any kind of authenticity or real information about ourselves. Also, there are other songs like 'I Feel Hap Hap Happy Hap' which are there only because they are cute.

I want to combine this song in a live show with jazz standards that are relatable to my experience in India, creating a performance that will be a dialogue between storytelling, situations of our contemporary society, and easy jazz-folk style. For me, it's an important album since it recovers the part of music that I like more, the one that connects individuals regardless of their nationality, background or experience, and speaks through universal emotions inherent inside of us. DAVID BRITTO



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Jeremiah de Rozario Shares Reflective New Track 'Sunflower'

The song is the Kochi-based singer-songwriter's first release of 2023

When Kochi-based singer-songwriter Jeremiah de Rozario released his debut single "Run to the Ocean" in 2020, at the time he was working as a banker. Since then, de Rozario quit his day job and took up music full-time. He says, "[I] haven't looked back." With a number of singles now under his belt, the artist is back with his latest offering, the acoustic pop number "Sunflower." In this interview with *Rolling Stone India*, de Rozario talks to us about the making of the song, its accompanying music video, what he has in store next and more. Read below:

How did the music bug get to you?

Coming from an Anglo-Indian family, I pretty much grew up watching everyone around me play at least one instrument and it seemed like everyone could sing. Pretty much every weekend was a jamming session. This had a massive influence on me but it wasn't until I turned 16 that I finally picked up the guitar and it was for the terrible reason of wanting to impress girls. However, in that, I kind of found out how much I loved singing and writing music even more. So, it started there, writing cheesy songs and then it went out to become a form of therapy for me where I could be honest with myself.

When did you write your new song "Sunflower" and what can you tell me about it?

'Sunflower' was written over two years back. There was no intention of actually writing it but it kind of just happened.

It started with the hook line, or at least the melody but I had no idea where to start with it. At that time, I was trying to write a song that wasn't about love. I went around searching for inspiration and that's when I thought of my nephew. He lost his dad when he was seven and I wondered what that father would say to his son if he could see him one last time. Once I had that inspiration and the melody, I was trying to find out what the words could be and randomly stumbled upon an Instagram fun fact that described sunflowers to actually be many flowers in one. I researched a little about that and pretty much based the enter theme around sunflowers. Once I wrote the song, I immediately went to Palee Francis (keyboardist from Kerala folk/indie band When Chai Met Toast). We worked together on a previous track called 'Dear Us' and he was just so good. I knew he would be able to help create something really nice. Honestly couldn't have asked for someone better to produce this.

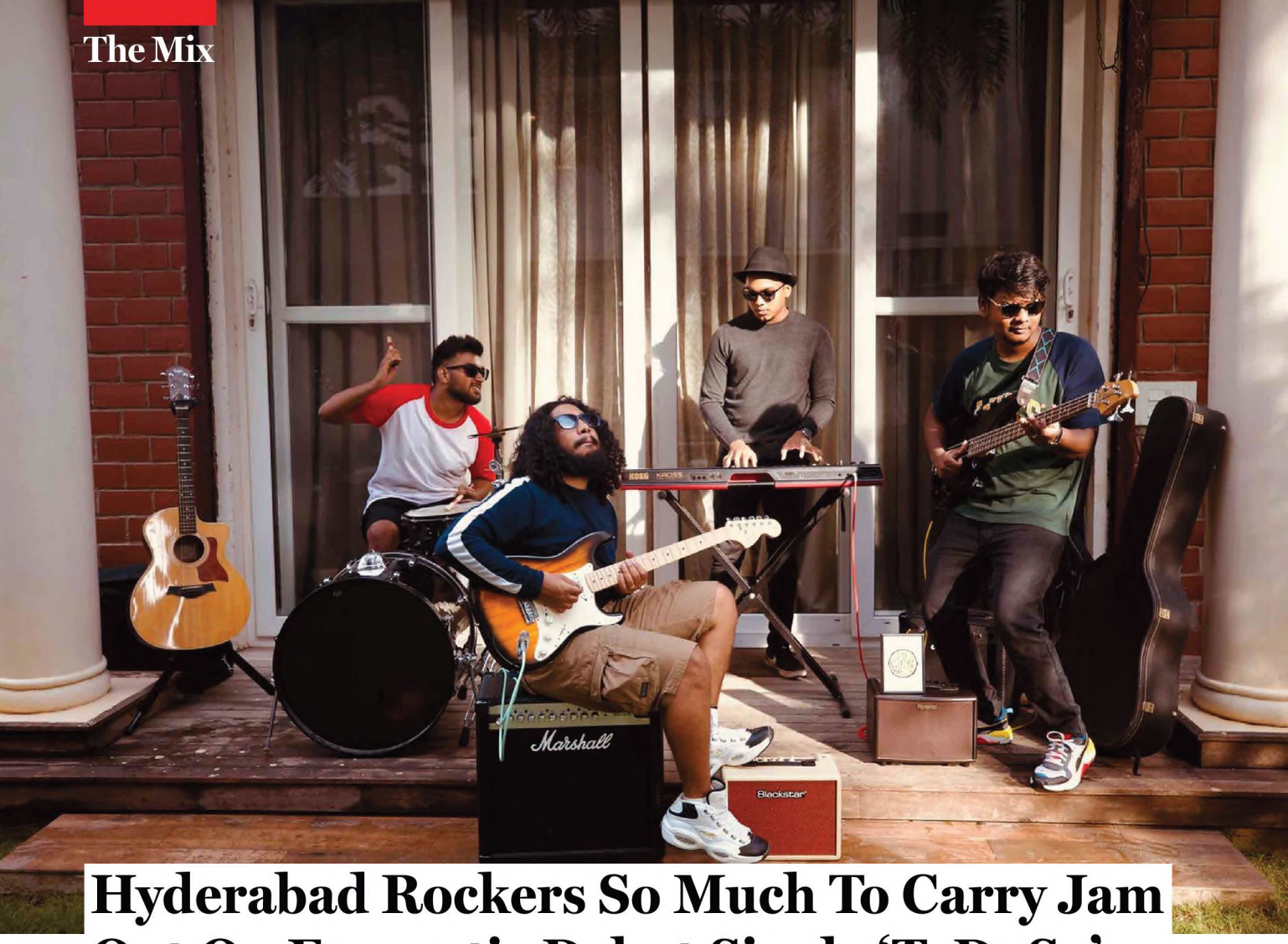
"I went around searching for inspiration and that's when I thought of my nephew, he lost his dad when he was seven and I wondered what that father would say to his son if he could see him one last time."

What can you tell us about the music video and how you put it together?

The director of the video is a friend named Suzanna Vincy and we have worked on previous videos together as well. We were trying to come up with budget-friendly ideas for the video and after a lot of contemplation, Suzanna came up with the idea of giving sunflowers to the people close to me. So, then we simply made a list of a few people who were family and friends and surprised them with a sunflower and a note. It was for the video, but it was also just a collection of wholesome moments. They were so happy to be given flowers and at the same time, I was reminded of how much they meant to me when I was writing the personalized notes to them. Our cinematographer Harikrishnan T Rajan didn't put down the camera for those three days because we were shooting everything, trying to capture all the emotions that were coming out and it was just a hoot working with him.

What's next?

I've just started working on a four-song EP set to release in about two months and then hopefully a country-wide tour post that. DAVID BRITTO



Hyderabad Rockers So Much To Carry Jam Out On Energetic Debut Single 'ToDoSo'

The band has also released a music video to accompany the track

HYDERABAD ROCK OUTFIT SO MUCH TO Carry – consisting of vocalist-guitarist John Reynolds, guitarist Aaron Pranay, bassist Praharsha Deep and drummer Kevin Joseph — initially met each other while playing Gospel music in church and later bumped into one another at one of Mumbai/Auckland blues-rockers Blackstratblues' gigs in 2019. Joseph says, "[At the gig we said to each other] Are we going to jam or what?" Three years on and the group are now out with their energetic debut single "ToDoSo."

According to the band, the track had gone through numerous versions before they settled on the final one. "Building the structure for the song was fairly simple, it was written at a time when COVID was huge, and we felt that spreading love in these circumstances is okay. It captures the fact that there are always a million reasons to hate and to love, but we primarily have to empathize and offer the love and kindness that we would want when we need it," says Reynolds. Sonically, the track includes crunchy guitar parts, pulsating grooves, steely vocals and catchy melodies. Mumbai multi-instrumentalist/vocalist Sidd Coutto mixed and mastered the song.

"It [the song] captures the fact that there are always a million reasons to hate and to love, but we have to offer the love that we would want when we need it," says Reynolds.

The song's accompanying music video – directed by Nikhil Dalton – sees the band rocking out and performing the track at Hyderabad's WallRide Skate Park. "We wanted to make a video in a cool location that reflects the mood of the song," says Pranay.

Next, the band are planning to release their eponymous debut album and are even lining up as many gigs as they can. Deep says, "We are determined to support the independent music scene in Hyderabad and are proud to be a part of this community, we are committed to making our city a hub for independent music." DAVID BRITTO

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Exploring Korean Confucianism as Depicted in K-Dramas

K-dramas frequently feature Confucian principles, giving viewers a window into the Korean way of life

The growing appeal of K-dramas has also made them an important resource for learning about Korean culture and social life. In this respect, Confucianism is one component of Korean culture that is frequently emphasized in K-dramas, and it's something we will investigate in this post with a focus on the roots and fundamental ideas of the notion in Korea as well as how it appears in K-dramas.

The moral and philosophical doctrine dubbed Confucianism has its roots in China and dates back thousands of years. It highlights the value of societal stability, security, and deference to power. Korea adopted Confucianism during the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), and it has subsequently shaped both Korean society and culture. In this sense, it should be underlined that Confucianism truly represents an ethic of life that has profoundly affected everything from government initiatives to cultural standards and principles in Korean society.

Confucianism's basic tenets are filial piety (respect for one's parents, elders, and hierarchy), the value of education and self-development, loyalty, and social harmony. K-dramas frequently feature these principles, giving viewers a window into the Korean way of life. Confucianism places a high priority on filial piety. The idea is that a happy family and community can be achieved by demonstrating respect for one's parents, relatives, and the law. By attempting to

better oneself through learning and self-cultivation, it is held that one may attain happiness while making an impact on society. Confucianism additionally stresses the importance of commitment and a harmonious society. A happy community and the upkeep of social order are said to be enhanced by loyalty to one's family, friends, and country.

Classical Confucian principles and contemporary Western values are blended to create contemporary Korean society. Although Confucianism still has a major impact on Korean culture, it is hardly the only underlying ideal. K-dramas have emerged as a popular medium for analyzing this: how Koreans increasingly embrace autonomy, imagination, and innovation while still upholding a strong sense of belonging and civic duty. They typically delve into cultural issues like family, neighborhood, education, and social standing, many of which are connected to Confucian principles, giving insight into how they function in the modern Korean lifestyle.

As an example, the theme of family is prevalent in many K-dramas, with a focus on filial piety and respect for those in charge. The priorities placed on families in Korean culture and the old Confucian principles that guide it are reflected in this. In a similar vein, education is seen as a key to success and social mobility in many K-dramas, which exemplifies the high value placed on it in Korea. Many K-dramas feature characters under academic strain who must do well to get enrolled in top universities, pointing out the vitality of Confucian principles in shaping the Korean community. Let's examine some instances of how Confucian principles are presented in K-dramas in more detail.

FILIAL PIETY, FAMILY DYNAMICS, AND THE PURSUIT OF EDUCATION

The depiction of strong family dynamics and a focus on honoring elders in K-dramas often reflect this value. A prime instance of a social satire that addresses upper-class parents' materialistic demands and how they relentlessly ensure their families' achievement while simultaneously upholding strong family bonds can be found in the 2018 drama *Sky Castle*. While the parents in the show are portrayed as being tough and demanding, they also have a genuine concern for their kids' happiness and success. The drama demonstrates how parents' expectations might occasionally strain their bonds with their children, but eventually, the family's love and support for one another triumph.

RESPECT FOR ELDERS AND AUTHORITY

The respect that youngsters have for their elders and their understanding of the value of order in society are two ways that this principle is frequently reinforced in K-dramas. The main character Seo Jang-geum (Lee Young-ae) in the drama *Jewel in the Palace* (2003) learns to respect tradition and abide by the law to preserve social harmony. Jang-geum encounters plenty of challenges because she is a woman in a patriarchal society, but she overcomes them by following her moral principles and displaying regard for those in authority. She ultimately rises to become the first female imperial doctor in the reign of the Joseon Dynasty.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION, SELF-CULTIVATION, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

Key Confucian principles that K-dramas have brought up in dramas like *Reply 1988* (2015) include education, self-cultivation, and the value of family and community. Five childhood friends, all of whom resided in Seoul's *Ssangmundong* neighborhood in 1988, are shown in the story relying on one another to get through their difficult adolescent years and chart a course for their futures. We also see the value of education and hard work in success and the realization of one's full potential. The hardships parents go through to give their children the best education possible are also highlighted in the drama, along with the characters coming to recognize the worth of education for not just achieving one's goals but also for helping to benefit society.

In conclusion, Confucianism has had a profound effect on Korea for many centuries, and by observing how Confucian values are portrayed in K-dramas, we may discover more about them and about Korean society at large.

DEBASHREE DUTTA

PHOTO BY JOONG HI-JUNG, COURTESY OF WIKIPEDIA; FLICKR; JTBC; TVN

Why Do We Often Praise K-Dramas with Toxic Relationships?

In K-dramas, often toxic relationships are seen as excellent storylines. Perhaps most of us, while watching them, let go of the unpleasant by merely cheering for such a relationship's eventual reconciliation

TOXIC RELATIONSHIPS ARE LIKE murky waters; they are dreary, dark, and debilitating but also enticing. They may tempt you to indulge in a deep dive that would sink you into the darkest recesses, yet you choose to accept the risk, be carried away, and keep going. As much as it is true for those who are in such relationships, K-dramas are a prime example of popular media that is rife with depictions of comparable occurrences.

In these dramas, often toxic relationships are essentially seen as excellent storylines. Come to think of it, they are, given that we have repeatedly fallen in love with them notwithstanding their glorification of something obnoxious. Perhaps most of us, while watching them, often let go of the unpleasant by merely cheering for such a relationship's eventual reconciliation. Why, though? Why are we so smitten with them? Why do we have a penchant for praising K-dramas with toxic relationships? Let me try to explain some of my theories based on the following three iconic K-dramas.

FULL HOUSE (2004)

Lee Young-Jae (Jung Ji-hoon, aka Rain), a snooty movie star, despises struggling writer Han Ji-eun (Song Hye-kyo), but fate pulls them together, reshuffles the cards, and compels them to act as pieces. Their lives spiral out of control after being pushed into living together under duress (a contract marriage). Lee forms their formal alliance on a whim to upset his crush, but his decision soon lands him in hot water.

He has no idea exactly how hard it would be to end the marriage, like Han, who doesn't know she'll fall for him. Although their equations and eccentricities appear funny at first, theirs is a dysfunctional relationship that hurts both. It gets a bit too much to deal with as they keep treating one another with contempt, yet, until the very end, they are bound together by deep-seated, unexpressed emotions. And it's this that keeps me most engaged in their story.

Lee feels compelled to take care of Han, even though he loathes her. Is it merely an act of kindness? That maintains my curiosity. Tension increases as they adjust to marriage, and Han's affection for him comes to the fore. Her discomfort, bitterness, and hopelessness are potent emotional triggers. We observe her juggling her professional commitments while waiting for Lee each day, making his meals, and taking care of him and the home while frequently being mocked and belittled by the man, just like many of us who experience identical situations. This relatability aspect, in my mind, helps to explain why we are drawn to stories about toxic relationships.

In the epilogue, when the couple makes up and is no longer afraid to confess their feelings, it renews our faith that a difficult relationship can develop into profound love. Therefore, it's comforting to see Lee and Han emerge victorious, serving as catharsis for the viewers.

BOYS OVER FLOWERS (2009)

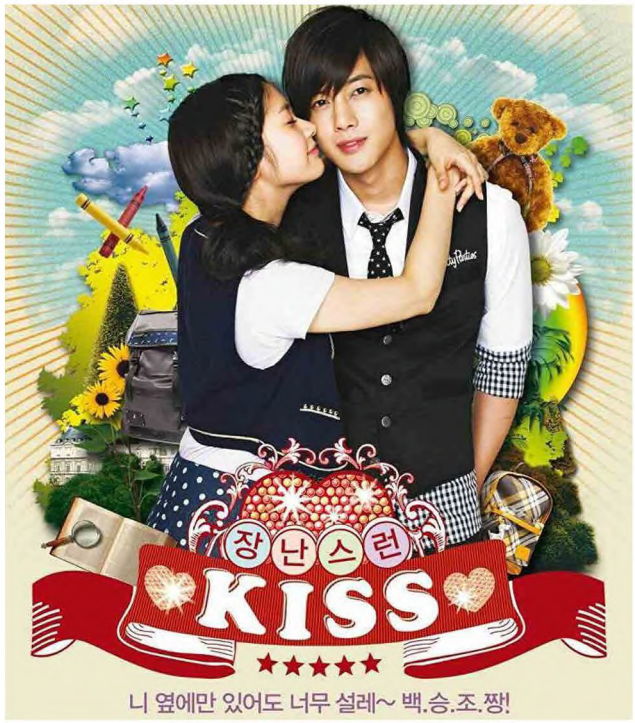
If emotional instability manifests itself in childhood as a result of parental

estrangement or egocentric conflicts with a loved one, toxic relationships may arise. Essentially, narcissists are prone to hostile responses. In their circumstances, anger against the other person may be the only emotion felt until love takes hold. In *Boys Over Flowers*, pompous rich brat Gu Jun-pyo (Lee Min-ho) detests yet pines for commoner Geum Jan-di (Koo Hye-sun) precisely because of that. He is a wayward teen—an outcome of his challenging surroundings and loneliness. So, when Jan-di rejects his bullying, ignoring his celebrity, his bruised ego gravitates towards her more, and resentment blossoms into romance. We still enjoy the nuances of their relationship, no matter the complexities it brings.

Many of you could counter that Jun-pyo is a complete jerk and that nothing makes up for the harm he inflicts on Jan-di. Both before and after she begins to like him, their connection is toxic. His manipulative mother's schemes continue to plague the girl and her family while the two are in love, to the point that Jun-pyo decides to ignore her, causing more damage. He is a chaotic prince who causes havoc in her life. Even so, their love story is memorable in that they go above and beyond to overcome adversities. That is one of *Boys Over Flowers*' main draws.

PLAYFUL KISS (2010)

Oh Ha-ni (Jung So-min), an academically challenged student, falls hopelessly in love with the most popular guy in school, Baek Seung-jo (Kim Hyun-joong). When she sends him a love note, which he promptly rejects, awkwardness expands. Ha-ni persuades Seung-jo further, but she inevitably grows wary of his rigid, cold demeanor and accepts a marriage proposal. This makes Seung-jo nervous about losing her and prompts him to seek her out. Based on the Japanese manga *Itazura Na Kiss*, this drama was such a global success that a brief special edition was shown on YouTube following the series finale.



A toxic love story, *Playful Kiss*, is based on the conflict between the two personality complexes. Seung-jo constantly disparages and treats Ha-ni with disdain, yet she keeps romanticizing him. He perpetuates the stereotype of the conceited, egotistical, bad-tempered man who disregards a girl's feelings and insults her, both physically and emotionally. At one point, he gives her an almost-forceful kiss and detests her immediately. He periodically humiliates her and teases her, but she continues to love him. Their adept portrayals propelled Kim Hyun-joong and Jung So-min to fame on a global scale, making the drama a hit with viewers.

Attention is also drawn to Ha-ni's character's gradual evolution. She may initially come off as weird and weak, but in the end, she proves to be a genuine prospect. Despite Seung-jo's snobbery and superiority, a diligent and caring Ha-ni proves effective in melting his heart, and what initially appears to be an uphill battle matures into a beautiful union. She progresses in life, therefore personifying the ideal that nobody is undeserving. With passion and persistence, any regular person can shine and become the center of attention—a lesson from the drama, which, in my opinion, also makes the toxic love story look good.

DEBASHREE DUTTA

PHOTO COURTESY OF KBS; KBS2; MBC

Q&A

Jenny Lewis

On touring with Harry Styles, living in Nashville, the importance of failure, and her excellent new album

By ANGIE MARTOCCIO

Jenny lewis knows she's not a real Southerner. "Let's be honest," the 47-year-old indie-rock icon says on a Zoom call. "I'm a Jewish girl from the Valley, transplanted in East Nashville. I'm not an outlaw at all." It's true: In Tennessee, where Lewis has been splitting her time with L.A. since 2017, the only law she breaks is smoking weed. She's also allergic to horses. And bonfires. "I'm the nerdiest, wimpiest Nashvillian," she confirms. Even so, Lewis' new album, *Joy'All*, is her *Nashville Skyline* moment, full of cozy melodies and lush pedal steel guitar. There's even a song titled "Giddy Up." And during our interview, she drops wisdom like a local in a porch rocking chair. "You can look outward," she says. "But really, you got to get on your pony and ride on out."

On 2021's "Puppy and a Truck," you sang, "My forties are kicking my ass/ And handing them to me in a margarita glass." Do you still feel like your forties are kicking your ass?
Oh, absolutely. I mean, my twenties and thirties were kicking my ass. That's just my karma. Every 10 years, something major happens in my life and I melt down, but I persevere. Now, people can forever figure out how old I am, because I say [in the song], "I'm 44 in 2020." So all you have to do is the math.

How did getting a puppy and a truck change you?
I was in a really rough spot. I'd been isolated for over a year, quarantining totally on my own, and I had to find things to get me out of the house. The truck provided that. I don't have any kids, but this dog opened me up in so many ways — being responsible for a soul and caring for something outside of yourself. Kind of obvious, but I had no idea.

Your last album felt very cathartic. This one sounds like you're having fun.
This record is a little prayer to myself. The more I play these songs, I realize it's about my relationship with myself and my higher power. There's something about having a positive title that draws people in, instead of *Death in the Valley*, or whatever I could have called it.

When you opened for Harry Styles, you were basically performing to 20,000 people who didn't know your music well. Was that a fun challenge?
I was up for it. It almost felt like the biggest DIY tour of all time because we were in our respective bubbles. There was no press in the pit, no one backstage. So it almost felt like the old-school days touring with Rilo Kiley before phones, and it felt very intimate despite being very big. I was free as fuck.

This is a funny story: During the pandemic, I went over to Ringo's house to sing background on one of his songs ["Here's to the Nights"]. And we're masked, and he's like, "How are you?" I said, "I feel like for the first time in my life, I'm off the hook." And Ringo said, [*in a perfect Liverpool accent*] "I wish I was on the hook!" Sorry to just name-drop Ringo. That's pretty big.

What kind of TV did you get into during the pandemic?
I watched every single Ryan Murphy-related production. So I've watched all of *American Horror Story*, which I absolutely love, and everything adjacent. Sarah Paulson is my favorite actress. That's how I became a fan.

She was an excellent Linda Tripp in *Impeachment* a couple of years ago.
She was so good. But you just can't record your friends, ever. I didn't appreciate Monica Lewinsky at the time, because she was so vilified. But when you really get to know that story, Clinton's the fucking douchebag.

Did you watch *Yellowjackets*?
I did, the first season. I loved it. We truly are in this Nineties-revival moment. I have a pair of Docs that I've been rocking again.

What do you think kids get wrong about that era?
Luckily, it seems that the full brow is still a thi ng. I would never tweeze my eyebrows like I did in the Nineties, because they never fully grew back.... I can't believe I'm talking about the Nineties, like a VH1 talking head.

OK, how about the early 2000s? *The Execution of All Things* recently turned 20, and you're about to do a 20th-anniversary Postal Service tour. How do those anniversaries feel?
It feels pretty weird. Time flies. Enjoy it. I appreciate all of it — the records, the bands, the good songs, the mediocre songs, the failed attempts, which I think is what makes artists interesting. You have to falter. You have to make your *Trans* — the Neil Young record everyone hated at the time. But that's a great fucking record. Only time will tell.

Do you ever see a Rilo Kiley reunion happening?
I'm open to it, for sure. It just has to be the right alchemy and the right timing. I think we owe it to each other to play those songs again, because that's the magic of being in a band. It's just the four people in a room and the energy that creates.

Speaking of reunions, I keep seeing rumors of a *Troop Beverly Hills* sequel in the works. Is this true?
I don't know. Is it? I haven't gotten the memo if it is.

What do you think it would be like to act again?
"It's been a while," to quote Staind. I think if Ryan Murphy were somehow involved, I'd be open to it.

BOBBI RICH

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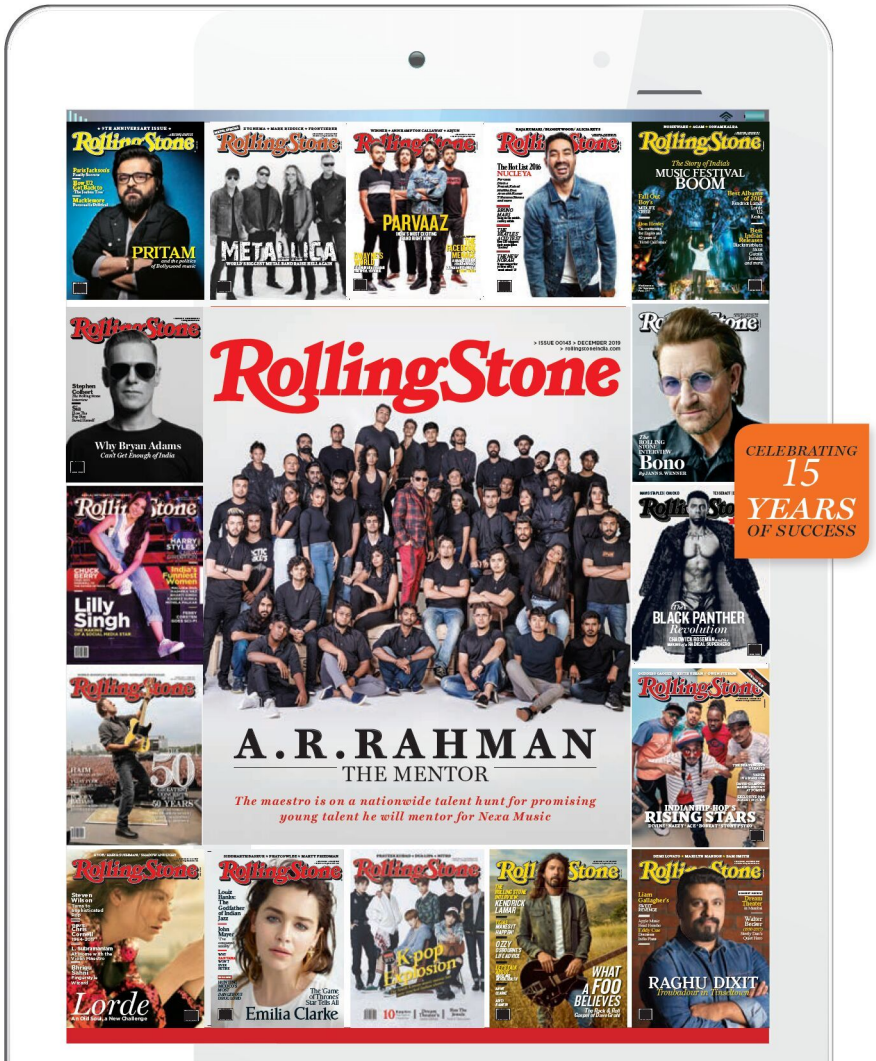

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Brilliant, Loud and Exceptional: Rolling Stone India's Women in Creativity Gathering Brought Together the Best in Arts and Business

The afternoon was a celebration of women revolutionizing their respective industries

This was probably one of the smartest, most brilliant rooms you would have ever been in. On a sunny summer afternoon, some of India's most inspiring artists, creators, thought leaders, business minds, disruptors and enablers met over brunch at Mumbai's Creatorland, which houses *Rolling Stone India* offices. Co-incidentally all of them also happened to be women!

While there shouldn't be a reason for a gathering of this kind – we absolutely need more such inspirational rooms – the occasion was the launch of *Rolling Stone India*'s first-ever Power List of 25 women from music, fashion, cinema, content and entrepreneurship who have made extraordinary contributions to these fields.

The atmosphere was one of achievement and triumph. Striking photo ops, masterful gin and beer cocktails and a dazzling brunch spread helped set the tone and theme for the day. The sense of collective pride in the room was palpable as everyone formed each other's hype squad, pumping each other up for their recent projects and upcoming gigs.

"It was amazing to witness female powerhouses of talent, all under one roof," said Mumbai musician Vasuda Sharma who has seen the tides turn in the industry since she debuted on the scene over a decade ago. "The event had an amazing vibe and it was so lovely catching up with artists I truly admire and also getting acquainted with new and promising talent. We need more events like these."

Breakout singer-songwriter Nisa Shetty, who has been flitting between film playback and

The Women In Creativity special cover featuring (from left) Malini Agarwal, Mithila Palkar and Asees Kaur.

Mumbai-based singer-songwriter Kamakshi Khanna performing at the Women in Creativity event.

her own music, felt the gathering served as a catalyst to future collaborations. " I feel we all connected somehow, and we kind of bounced off each other. I think it's so important to have these kinds of events where all these creators meet and sort of share their ideas, even what they're doing at that point. It just motivates you and it kind of inspires you for your next project." She adds, "I hope more of these events happen, I think they're like little hubs of energy that we need for charging our souls and going back out into the world."

The event comes at a time when women continue to be underrepresented at large, and the Power List aims to foster a sense of community. One of the most eclectic honors to have debuted in the industry, the list also serves as a visible sign of change. For far too long, the word power has come to denote a certain kind of influence, which may or may not be inspirational, or a catalyst or fuel. The Women In Creativity Power List reclaims the sheer power of excellence. The power that lies in authentic art, vision, purpose and accomplishments. The power that cannot be measured by any one standard.

Now while this list is exclusive and extraordinary, it is by no means exhaustive, definitive or conclusive. This is the first of the many chronicles that *Rolling Stone India* plans to launch with a very clear aim: to record the creative movement that we are witnessing in India today. The Power List 2023 Honorees are Asees Kaur, Mithila Palkar, Malini Agarwal, Guneet Monga, Kausar Munir, Sushant Divgikr/Rani KoHEnur, Pooja Jauhari, Arati Kadav, Sujata and Taniya Biswas, Sumukhi Suresh, Dolly Rateshwar, Kamiya Jani, Sejal Kumar, Mehek Malhotra, Lisa Mishra, Nagma Mirajkar, Harshdeep Kaur, Raja Kumari, Leeza Mangaldas, Kartiki Gonsalves, Masaba Gupta, Falguni Peacock, Prajakta Koli, Trinetra Haldar Gummaraju and Niharika NM.

Compiling this list was no easy task. Our power-packed jury comprised the acclaimed artist and curator Brinda Miller, the marketing maverick Jasleen Kaur and Executive Editor Nirmika Singh, along with Team *Rolling Stone India*.

The gathering, hosted by entrepreneur Karishma Govil, also featured the unveiling of the Women In Creativity special cover featuring Asees Kaur, Malini Agarwal and Mithila Palkar. The performances that followed were one to remember. Musicians Tanmaya Bhatnagar, Kamakshi Khanna, Aarya QK and Simran Chaudhary brought the house down! Here's to more!

ROLLING STONE INDIA

THE MONETA

Asees Kaur, Mithila Palkar and Malini Agarwal on Being India's Foremost #WomenInCreativity

The three faces of music and entertainment in India discuss why they value authenticity at all costs

BY ROLLING STONE INDIA

Photographer PRIYANKK NANDWANA

Art Director NIKITA RAO

Styling PEUSHA SETHIA AND SAKSHI PRITHYANI

Watch Partner TISSOT INDIA

THE PATH TO CREATIVITY IS SCARY. Who teaches you the essential skills and who nourishes the hunger to be creative? Not every home and certainly not the current educational system. To choose to be creative is to embrace uncertainty, resolve and a keen love for the process — things that we as a society neither teach kids nor train teachers in.

In a climate as discouraging as this, picking the path of creativity is an act of courage. This cover story is a chronicle of three journeys that have displayed dedication and defiance in their pursuit of creative careers. Asees Kaur is a distinguished vocalist and playback singer. Her most notable songs have been "Chogada" from *Loveyatri* (2018), "Raatan Lambiyan" from *Shershaah* (2021) and "Kacchi Doriyaan" from *Maja Ma* (2022). Kaur is breaking ground in the Indian film industry as an artist who can sing hit playback songs as well as viral non-film music, thereby cementing a hybrid, comprehensive audience across the world.

Mithila Palkar is an actor and content creator who has made a name for herself in both the film and digital space. With her unique blend of talent and charisma, Mithila has become a fan favorite and has starred in numerous web series including *Little Things* and *Girl in the City*. Her contributions to the world of entertainment have helped to redefine the industry and have inspired a new generation of actors and creators.

Malini Agarwal is the founder of *MissMalini* (India's leading entertainment website) and The Good Creator Co for influencers. Over the years, she has grown *MissMalini* into a successful digital media platform, authored a book and become a powerful

HAIR AND MAKE-UP:
GAYETRI CHAKRAVARTHY AND NITU TAMANG

OWARDROBE COURTESY:
SHOPVERB

EARRINGS: **PIPA + BELLA X RHEA KAPOOR**

HAIR AND MAKE-UP:
KAJOL MULANI
WARDROBE COURTESY
OUTFIT: COVER STORY

HAIR AND MAKE-UP:
GAYETRI CHAKRAVARTHY AND NITU TAMANG

WARDROBE COURTESY
TOP & SKIRT: **LABEL RSVP**

EARRINGS: **PIPA BELLA X RHEA KAPOOR**

social media influencer. Agarwal is a pioneer in digital media, leveraging social media to build a loyal audience and a successful brand, making her a role model for entrepreneurs and a notable figure in today's fast-paced media industry.

In this interview with *Rolling Stone India*, Agarwal, Palkar and Kaur discuss creativity, entreprenrship, what it takes to be successful and more. Read below:

Why do you think it is important to have a 'Women in Creativity' list?

Agarwal: I used to struggle a lot with the idea of women's awards or women's lists or for instance being part of Women in Creativity. But I learned this actually from my husband and he wasn't mansplaining he was actually giving me some great insight, that in a world where men do get more opportunities and historically have had so many more chances, if we were to make one global list of people who are creative just by the virtue of the population that has had that access, there would be more men on that list. So I think it's great that a spotlight is being shone upon women in creativity or women of impact and I'm here for this narrative.

I think one day we won't need to make that differentiation and I'm sure there are more than enough lists that are not just men and women, there's now non-binary and every spectrum of the rainbow but I think that instead of focussing on feeling squeamish that, why do we have to have a separate lists, I think we should focus on the fact that there are so many incredible women who deserve to be on a list at all and I think that's where I've kind of made my peace with it. I think the thing I do struggle with is celebrating Women's Day once a year. I think we should celebrate men, women, entrepreneurs, people who are creative and good kind-hearted people every single day and live our best lives and not wish time away. I think it's never a bad thing if somebody is trying to highlight a good skill.

Palkar: I think the issue of Women in Creativity is important because this is something that we've been fighting for a very long time and it is taking its own course to change and I will not deny that change is happening, but I think the more we talk about it, the more we action it, is when we will actually experience the change. So it is very important that we all come together, are our own voices and speed this process up. Because we deserve the best.

Kaur: This issue is very important and very close to my heart because women genuinely need more recognition in every field and if we promote women in music in influencing, in acting, in films, everywhere, I think the world will be a better place. The industry will be s better and a safer place.

What are your thoughts on the hustle culture?

Agarwal: I believe in the hustle and understand sometimes that it can be overwhelming and it can really get to you and cause a lot of anxiety. But I think it depends on how you look at hustle. I like the hustle for the energy, keeping myself on my toes and the challenge. I don't like the hustle of the compare-and-cancel culture.

What is it like at being the best in your field?

Palkar: I mean, it's a lot of pressure and a lot of responsibility. It's kind of you to say that and I don't take it lightly. I just hope that I can keep doing better so that a lot of us find our voices to be better versions of ourselves.

Kaur: My only thoughts will be thank you so much. I'm really glad to hear this and I just pray and hope to maintain this for a long time.

What advice would you give your younger self?

Agarwal: I've written a whole chapter in my first book called 'A Letter to My 18-Year-Old Self' in which I basically told young Miss Malini before she was Miss Malini that you have the most wealth. You have the wealthiest and most valuable currency in the world which is time. You have so much time to make mistakes, make friends, learn things, grow, fulfill all your dreams and I think that's what I really wanted her to know that she should value that time and never wish time away.

What should people know about entrepreneurship?

Agarwal: I think that I would like to demystify the belief that you have to be an MBA or business minded to become an entrepreneur. I think you can be an entrepreneur no matter what your background is. I have met so many incredible entrepreneurs who started off in the pandemic deciding to make cake in jars and especially for women who a lot of times feel, 'I'm not a businesswoman or I'm not an entrepreneur,' you absolutely must stop telling yourself that because I used to think that way and look at me now.

What are some musts for a career in creativity?

Palkar: Persistence and resilience are two very important things that I follow, and I think it is important to really hold on to those, especially in the world that we live in.

Kaur: I think hard work and dedication is something that really helps you to do better in any field and for creativity, I think keeping yourself sane is very important because if you are at peace only then you can create amazing things, amazing music, amazing films, whatever you are doing.

How has diversifying helped your entrepreneurial journey?

Agarwal: Today you can make anything your career and it's fabulous. I can be a makeup artist or a social media influencer. There are careers that are going to exist for Gen Alpha that don't exist yet. But I think what's incredible about the women on this list is that even though they are so unique in what they do and so vast in their skill set I think they all have a string of empathy and high EQ that you will find in common with each of them. They work hard, they hustle hard, they're extremely creative and I think that they don't take no for an answer even though and I'm sure they've all had, and I've spoken to many of them, bouts of self-doubt, imposter syndrome, dealt with patriarchy, dealt with many a no. I think as a result of it the women on this list never become hard, they still have a soft mushy interior and I love that about them.

Diversifying is so key, I think for me diversifying was being platform agnostic. We're not just about being a blog, people don't go around saying I'm a blogger, they say I'm a content creator or an influencer. Tomorrow there will be another word for it. But it's about being inclusive, platform agnostic and collaborative. I love this quote and I repeat it everywhere, 'You don't have to unscrew anybody else's lightbulb to shine.'

What would you like your legacy to be remembered as?

Kaur: I would like my legacy to be somewhat like Madam Noor Jehan Ji because I am an ardent fan of hers and I really quite like my journey so far and I look forward to make it even better and melodious.

What is your proudest moment?

Kaur: I think I am proud of the fact that today I am living my dream because if you are not living your dream and you are living a life which is under someone else's control or under someone else's influence that is a very difficult thing to do. So for me to be proud of something is living my own dream and living it in a beautiful way possible.

PULSE OF THE

Get your Beats on with rapper Srushti Tawade and digital creator Niharika NM as they talk about breaking barriers, conquering creative blocks, and staying real

BY ANURAG TAGAT

CREATOR CULTURE

Art Director
Tanvi Shah

Art Assistant
Siddhi Chavan

Artwork By
Milisha Joisar

Brand Partner
Budweiser Beats
#GetYourBeatsOn

BETWEEN THE TWO OF THEM, ONE'S GOING ON A FIRST DATE WITH STAR CRICKETER SHUBMAN GILL AND ANOTHER IS CHOOSING "BREAKFAST OVER BAE" AND SHUNNING A TOXIC EX.

Both Niharika NM and Srushti Tawade have rocked the cover of *Rolling Stone India* before and now they're here together and taking stock of their respective journeys as creators so far.

The pair give us a crash course on what it takes to be a content creator in 2023, even as they're in the spotlight for Budweiser Beats' collaboration series Real Behind The Reel, which aims to empower creators to conquer obstacles, ignite inspiration, and unlock their fullest potential. It aims to uncover the hidden stories, celebrate the visionaries, and amplify the voices shaping the future of creativity and define what it means to 'Get Your Beats On'.

If there are things they share in common, it's not difficult to point out -- Niharika and Tawade have both amassed a massive following often for their humorous turns, but also keeping their comedic intent rooted in awkward and sometimes even uncomfortable truths.

From dating advice to always pulling the funniest facial expressions on the Internet, engineer-turned-digital creator Niharika NM says authenticity stays at the core of her writing now that the Bengaluru girl has arguably broken into the mainstream. Tawade, for her part, is still staying close to hip-hop but doing it her way, moving forward with the confidence that "whatever is served plenty" will eventually become part of mainstream consciousness rather than a niche with one-time relevance.

With millions of followers and streams, Niharika and Tawade also keep things fresh by creating and slipping into different character modes -- they can have a Napoleon complex like Tawade's Chota Don or just pile on the exaggerated humor like Niharika in her videos. "There's more to me than just being the 'funny' persona. So, if you ever meet me in person or interact with me outside of my videos, don't be surprised if I'm not constantly cracking jokes," Niharika says.

The creators give us the inside track on what goes into seeing their projects come to fruition, how they've seen hyperlocal references somehow having a global appeal and what's coming up next. Excerpts:

Rolling Stone India: **I'm guessing you've both shown up on each other's radars from time to time. What you think of each other's work so far and what was the first song/video/content that you saw of each other?**

Niharika NM: I think Srushti is fabulous at what she does. I've seen a tonne of her work on my feed and I'm so happy that she's getting the kind of recognition that she truly deserves! I can't wait to see all the magic she creates in the future!

Srushti Tawade: It was a reel of hers from years ago. She used to make very relatable and funny content all the time. I found her humor really fun and raw. More slapstick sometimes happens to make artists less witty. I don't think Niharika ever fell in that category, though!

You've both had these unmistakable intersections with the "mainstream." Does it take anything different to be creative for mainstream audiences?

Niharika: Honestly as cliche as it may sound, being authentic can genuinely help you connect with your audience. Having said that, to be creative for mainstream audiences, I think it's essential to create content with broad appeal, accessible language, and a balance between familiarity and innovation. Being mindful of cultural sensitivities, and staying informed about audience preferences and trends are also key.

Tawade: I believe you are always your first target audience. And if you can't convince yourself of absolutely owning your very instinctive idea, art can become very mechanical, which isn't a good thing. Whatever is served plenty will eventually become the mainstream. And I believe that your rawness can become as mainstream as you'd like if your conviction doesn't fall short.

Due to the nature of the Internet, something that you may have thought of as a super specific, or hyperlocal cultural reference has somehow got understood on a global level. Does it surprise you when things like that happen? Or do you feel we're always all thinking 'globally'?

Tawade: It's a pleasant surprise to watch your art be received on a large scale and in more meaningful

> *"I believe you are always your first target audience. And if you can't convince yourself of absolutely owning your very instinctive idea, art can become very mechanical — Tawade"*

BEATS
ENERGY DRINK

BEATS
ENERGY DRINK

> *As much as I'd love to have a writers' room one day, I'm currently my own writers' room. I do, however, make my friends and family turn into sounding boards and guinea pigs to test content and it's been really helpful so far"*
> *— Niharika*

ways than you may have imagined it to be. It's always a reason to be grateful for the attention being paid, without a doubt.

Niharika: As a content creator, I'm constantly amazed by how the Internet has the power to take something that starts as a local reference and make it known worldwide. It's like a small joke or cultural tidbit that can suddenly become familiar to people from all over the globe. We're living in a time where we're more interconnected than ever before, thanks to technology and social media. Information travels quickly, crossing cultural boundaries effortlessly, and creating a sense of global community. It's truly astonishing and thrilling to witness the impact and reach of our content in this digital era

You both have a strong affinity for creating characters with your works. What are the challenges in that?

Niharika: I guess making sure the characters are unique and interesting among others that already exist is definitely a challenge. Keeping the characters consistent throughout different sketches can also be tricky, along with developing depth and growth in the characters' personalities and stories as well. Balancing how the characters look and how they tell a story visually can be tough sometimes, alongside making the characters relatable and likable in order to connect with the audience.

Tawade: Creating characters must come easy to any artist who has a liking for observing life. Imagination helps too. The challenge one may face is to resist the urge of making everything black and white as such. Grey is good. Grey is real. And grey is relatable.

Do you ever feel that the more personas you present to the public, they also may be then surprised when they speak with who you are normally, when you're not playing a character or "on" so to speak? What have your experiences been like on that front?

Tawade: I often find myself thinking of life as a movie. In that sense, I'm always playing a character, even if it be the character of Srushti Tawade. I still believe in plot twists, character arcs, dialogue, etc when it comes to real life. So, it's difficult to recall the last time I wasn't playing a character at all, to begin with.

Niharika: As a comedy creator, I know that when people meet me off-camera, they might have certain expectations. In my videos, I often portray exaggerated characters or showcase a heightened version of myself to entertain my audience. However, I can't be that version of me all the time. While I enjoy making people through my content, there's more to me than just being the "funny" persona. So, if you ever meet me in person or interact with me outside of my videos, don't be surprised if I'm not constantly cracking jokes. I'm still the same person, just embracing the diverse aspects of who I am beyond the realm of comedy.

Where do you think is the best place or environment where you do all your ideating?

Tawade: Often, the ability to create is associated with willpower. Even with a deadline, willpower can really get me to push through. Moreover, consumption of art and content or even playing games that require creativity helps exercise the right brain. I do a lot of it very often.

Niharika: As a creator that makes content based on observational comedy, the world is literally my oyster. Most, if not all, of my ideas, come to me when I'm on the go or in a public setting where I take inspiration from mundane situations or experiences that I'm a part of. I always have a running list of ideas banked on my phone that I dip into whenever I have to create content.

Niharika, you've often leaned into this format where you're interacting with a celebrity/public persona, like Shubman Gill recently. How much of that role-playing involves trying to get the other person out of their shell? Because it feels like in your videos, they too are sort of kept within a certain character range to keep things humorous.

Niharika: Whenever I collaborate with someone, I make sure that it is an actual collaboration where both of us let our personalities come through while following a loosely written sketch so that we have enough direction without being confined to a script that's fully written out and set in stone which would leave little to no room for improvisation. Most, if not all, of the collaborations I've done so far, have had the other person be fully involved and invested from the pre-production and writing all through the final edit phase and I can't be more grateful and honored because it plays a huge role in why the collabs are able to set themselves apart from others.

Srushti, you just had "Breakfast Over Bae" come out -- a fun, relatable concept that also adds new themes to Indian hip-hop. How did the song come about and have you seen any reactions to it that you found cool?

Tawade: 'Breakfast Over Bae' has been my most random experiment so far. And, to be precise, I wrote it out of sheer hunger. I did not actually realize it was such an experiment until I was told so. And most people have been calling this song "international," which seems pretty accurate to me. Hunger is pretty much a global thing. Well, this song certainly is the most important meal before you go about your day listening to the rest of my album!

What's been a recent breakthrough you've been really proud of?

Tawade: I think, much like really young children, I've not explored the feeling of pride so much when it comes to events that are supposedly 'breakthroughs'. Sometimes, I happen to feel proud of myself for knowing what I want for dinner, and that's about it!

Niharika: As someone that started out on the internet very young, I basically grew up on the internet, and along the way somewhere, I guess I forgot to pause and look back at how far I've been able to pull myself, and I'm really proud of that. I'm proud of myself for trusting myself and giving myself an actual shot at not only dreaming big but actually trying to make those dreams come true.

In the age of creators that we've reached today, a lot is said about teams and people employing a team of writers or having other creative minds to collaborate with. Do you prefer the DIY method yourselves? How do you navigate offers for collabs and seeking out a sounding board or assistance in your creativity?

Niharika: As much as I'd love to have a writers' room one day, I'm currently my own writer's room. I do, however, make my friends and family turn into sounding boards and guinea pigs to test content and it's been really helpful so far. But, as I foray into different formats/types of content, I would probably explore working with other writers or artists.

> *"I think it's about figuring out when too many cooks might spoil the broth versus when more might be merrier. As far as my current work is concerned, it does not require me to get assistance in writing — Tawade"*

Tawade: I think it's about figuring out when too many cooks might spoil the broth versus when more might be merrier. As far as my current work is concerned, it does not require me to get assistance in writing. However, some project at some point in the future very well might need that, & I would be up for it then.

Can you tell us a bit about what's coming up for you both individually in 2023? Could we see a collab between you in the future? Everyone knows that has potential for comedy gold!

Niharika: I guess this year has truly been the year for me to own the content creation space, and I've been working on potentially cracking new content formats for the foreseeable future. We're also parallelly working on a bunch of cool projects that are not entirely social media based, but you'll have to wait a while to hear more about that [winks]. And as far as collaborating w Srushti goes, I'm so down! Let's go, Srushti!!

Tawade: 2023 is my first year into my career, which means I will learn and take baby steps towards the rest of it. My debut album and a few other unreal projects are aligned for release through the year. I'm assuming a lot of learning will come my way, and Niharika very well might be part of it. However, it's not just comedy that you must expect from the likes of us. Always be ready for a surprise. That'show we roll!

We all face moments of self-doubt inour creative journeys. How do you stay motivated and push through those moments to 'get your beats on'?

Tawade: Self-doubt is a lot like dandruff. It's almost always there. And every now and then, you look into the mirror and find it sitting on your head. Sometimes, other people see it before you can & they point it out to you. It sure leaves you feeling very conscious. Well, reassurance through words or actions can act as the shampoo you must use, and you won't itch anymore.

Niharika: As a creator, I understand that self-doubt is a common experience in the creative journey. To stay motivated and push through those moments, I remind myself of my passion and purpose, reconnecting with the reasons why I started in the first place. I'm also blessed to have amazing people as family and friends that are my support system and are always rooting for me while also giving me reality checks as and when I need them. I also make sure to dream big but set realistic goals, celebrate small victories, and focus on personal growth rather than comparing myself to others.

'Get Your Beats On' can mean differently for different people. For some, it is to stay focused, energized and in the creative zone. What does it mean to you?

Tawade: 'Get Your Beats On' means it's time for me to learn what else is not so impossible to pull off after all.

Niharika: 'Get your Beats on' to me means to get in my zone, do what I do best and do it even better.

Collaboration can bring fresh perspectives and ideas. Have there been any instances where teaming up with another creative individual or brand pushed you to new creative heights? How did it influence your work?

Niharika: Very recently, for the Budweiser Beats collab we adopted a format that I don't usually use, and I was honestly terrified because It wasn't like the videos I usually make, and I was nervous about being able to integrate the brand organically and not force fit it, and it turned out great. The moral of the story -- don't be afraid to step out of your comfort zone and Get your Beats on even if it terrifies you because something amazing might come out of it.

Tawade: With Budweiser Beats, I had more fun than a usual brand collaboration has to offer. I think the sheer liberty to be myself and let my creativity put me in a happier spot instantly.

Fresh Indie Picks

Catch up on the latest releases from independent acts

By David Britto

Anubha Kaul, Aman Jagwani – *"Lighthouse"*

Mumbai artists vocalist Anubha Kaul and drummer/producer Aman Jagwani are out with their latest offering, the immersive "Lighthouse." The track opens delicately and stays that way for much of it before groovy drums help close out the song. Kaul's blissful vocals shine throughout with harmonies and luxurious melodies. In a statement, the artists said, "'Lighthouse' is a meditative, calming, and sometimes frightful journey towards comfort or home. Much like a real lighthouse, we all have that one thing, or person, a space or place that offers grounding or solace in times of difficulty."

Aarifah – *"Anyway"*

Mumbai-bred and Pune-based singer-songwriter Aarifah's just-released sophomore single comes in the shape of the acoustic indie-rock track entitled "Anyway." The song opens with poignant piano parts and Aarifah's calming vocals before gentle acoustic guitar strumming, bass, drums and strings enter the fray. In a statement, Aarifah said, "This song is about going through heartbreak, learning that nothing can protect me from it, and then realizing that 'every single detail, had its part to play, in meeting you...'"

Ash Lune – *"Sunday Afternoon"*

Mumbai-bred and Australia-based singer-songwriter Ash Lune's newest single is the acoustic-leaning "Sunday Afternoon." The track features jangly guitar strumming, string parts, Ash Lune's evocative vocals, radiant harmonies and a hooky vocal section. In a statement, the artist said, "It's an honest description of what you'd see if you came over to my place on a Sunday afternoon. It's the most honest description of my anxiety there is."

COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS; KEENAN PEREIRA (KAUL AND JAGWANI)

Co-Existence – *Parapraxis*

Pune-based electronic duo Co-Existence has just released their four-track debut EP *Parapraxis*. Co-Existence – consisting of DJs Ayush and Nagi – offer trance, techno and deep house music across the record. There's also glitch soundscapes and industrial music on show.

The Lightyears Explode – *"Fighting With Your Family"*

Mumbai pop/punk rockers The Lightyears Explode are now out with the second single off their sophomore full-length album *Suburban Prose*. The song features a syrupy acoustic guitar riff as well as the band's catchy hooks, up-tempo sound, punchy distorted guitar parts as well as a tasty solo. In a statement, the band said, "It deals with the generation gap, political or Ideological differences and trauma that causes tensions in many modern families, but also focuses on the love that brings them together."

Jamna Paar – *Strangers from Past Life*

New Delhi bassist Gaurav Balani (from rockers Parikrama and electro-rockers Inalab) and flautist Shashank Singhania's electronica duo Jamna Paar have recently released their debut eight-track full-length album *Strangers from Past Life*. The pair pack in plenty of soundscapes throughout the record from drum n bass to Indian classical and more. The album also includes a host of collaborators such as Apeksha Dandekar, Aditi Singh Sharma, Saptak Chatterjee and others to help bring the songs to life. In a statement, the duo said, "[We] decided to write music that reflected the whirlwind of emotions each of us experienced during the pandemic."

FamLi – *Nobody Ever Comes To VP*

Indo-Canadian producer Arnob Bal aka FamLi has followed up his 2020 beat tape *Sleepless In Andheri West* with the newly released 14-track *Nobody Ever Comes To VP*. Bal counts the new set of songs as a sister record to its predecessor. *Nobody Ever Comes To VP* delves into the artist's Canadian side and includes Toronto-centric music from the mid-90s to mid-2000s. In a statement, Bal said, "The beats are weaved together using spoken word clips from podcasts and lectures. In an abstract way, the clips tell the story of decline in contemporary Western society."

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST; LIZA MARIA (JAMNA PAAR); VIRAL DHAROD (THE LIGHTYEARS EXPLODE); PARIZAD D (FAMLI)

Aabishkar Thatal – *Hiunda*

Gangtok singer-songwriter Aabishkar Thatal first teased his debut EP in 2022 with the harmonious single "Nau Daanda Paari." Now, Thatal is out with his five-track offering entitled *Hiunda*. The record includes an acoustic leaning folk sound with beautiful plucked guitar parts, Thatal's immersive vocals and emotion. The artist takes the listener on a journey throughout the record as he sings in his native language. The artist said in a statement, "As I worked on *Hiunda*, I kept in mind the art of imperfection. I believe that perfection is just an illusion, and embracing the flaws and imperfections in our work is what makes it unique and special."

Biancca – *"Uljhe Dil"*

Mumbai singer-songwriter Biancca's debut single comes in the shape of the rock track "Uljhe Dil." The song includes a groovy bassline, gritty guitars, steely drums, Biancca's soaring vocals and more. In a statement, the artist said, "'Uljhe Dil' talks about how complicated relationships can overwhelm us, making our hearts feel tangled. It need not be a romantic one, it could be any relationship. And sometimes we have to let go of a loved one, which is never easy. But even after we do, at times we find a part of them still living in us and our tangled hearts still longing for love."

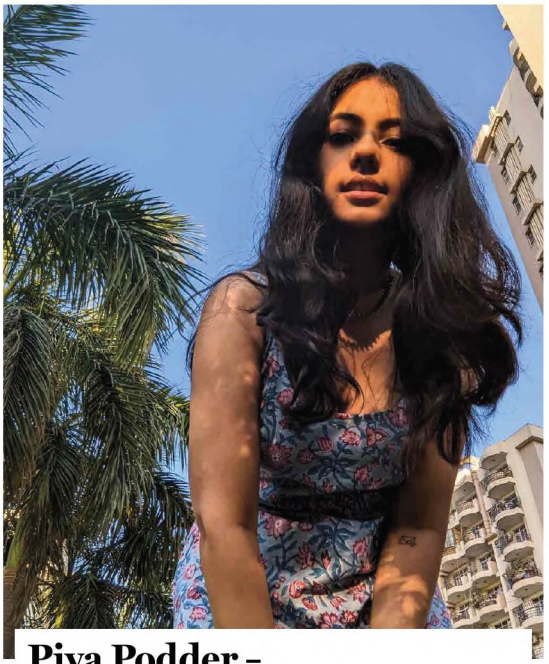
AB! and Natascha – *"Keeping You Sane"*

Mumbai artists AB! and Natascha collaborate on the saccharine new song "Keeping You Sane." The upbeat pop track includes infectious melodies from both artists while they harmonize at parts too which makes for great ear candy. The song is also accompanied by a colorful music video. In a statement, AB! said, "I made this song a while ago with the intention of communicating how I felt through lyrics. A lot of emotions attached while making this and it took a year to find the right artist to work with who could reciprocate my feelings on the song and write what the song needed."

COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

Anoushka Kotak – *"Time's Up"*

Mumbai-bred singer-songwriter Anoushka Kotak shares a soulful number as her debut single entitled "Time's Up." The R&B-laced song also features pop and jazz elements, Kotak's strong vocal performance and blissful harmonies. In a statement, the artist said, "'Time's Up' is an empowerment anthem about finally having the courage to cut people, who leave you bruised and broken, out of your life."



Piya Podder – *"Fool of Myself"*

New Delhi-based singer-songwriter Piya Podder's latest offering is the pop-leaning track entitled "Fool of Myself." The track features a booming bassline while drums, guitar as well Podder's delicate vocals fill up the sound. In a statement, the artist said, "The lyrics of the song stem from a place of insecurity, of loving somebody much more than they love you, which could potentially lead to heartbreak."

COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

rinaldo *"darling"*

Goa-based singer-songwriter Rinaldo D'souza – who goes by his first name – is now out with his sophomore single, the sensual "darling," six years on since releasing his debut single in the shape of the poignant "Come Over." The musician – who previously helmed rhythm guitar duties for Mumbai blues-rockers The Tripp – offers a laidback R&B pop sound on his new slow burner which is filled with plenty of sonic embellishments, crooning vocals and pleasing harmonies.

Space Hydra – *"Of Planet"*

Bengaluru electronic alt-rock band Space Hydra gets innovative on their energetic new song "Of Planet." The track includes a stomping drum groove, melodic and distorted guitar hooks, a punchy bassline as well as voice samples. In a statement, the band said, "'Of Planet' talks about conservation of nature and the planet. Featuring chopped samples of Carl Sagan's voice and inspired by his philosophy, the song establishes the almost insignificant and futile nature of human greed in the larger context of an expanding universe."

Ash Andrade, Bevvibez – *"Summer"*

With temperatures rising around parts of India, Goa-based artist Ash Andrade is out with the aptly titled dance track "Summer." Produced by Bevvibez, the track includes pop elements, polished soundscapes, Andrade's passioned vocals and more.

Abhishek Hazarika – *"Go Home Peter"*

New Delhi singer-songwriter Abhishek Hazarika recently released the sixth single off his forthcoming album *BRIGHTENDASH* in the shape of the blues-rock offering "Go Home Peter." The song includes crunchy guitars, heavy drums and cheeky lyrics as well as Hazarika's crisp vocals. In a statement, the artist said, "This song tells the fictional tale of a college student struggling for validation and acceptance amongst peers. He is also an upcoming musician."

krishaa – *"Figure It Out"*

Mumbai/Boston singer-songwriter krishaa's newest single is the folk-pop song entitled "Figure It Out." The track includes vibrant acoustic guitar strumming while drums, bass and keys help lift the song. The artist's effervescent vocals shine throughout with emotion and conviction. In a statement, she said, "'Figure It Out' is a song about searching for the sound of your own voice over a sea of other voices that are overpowering your thoughts. I wrote this at a time when I was receiving a lot of advice from a lot of people and that made it difficult to stay connected with what was authentically me. This song is about re-discovering what you want and who you are and chalking your own path."

Mann Bipin – *MB PROJKT*

Mumbai-bred and Los Angeles-based artist Mann Bipin's new seven-track album *MB PROJKT* falls into the jazz-fusion category and is complete with plenty of dynamics, dexterity and exemplary musicianship. The record also features a host of collaborators. In a statement, the artist said, "The album is a sole representation of me in phases. An evolution of myself right from the love for world music and Indian classical."

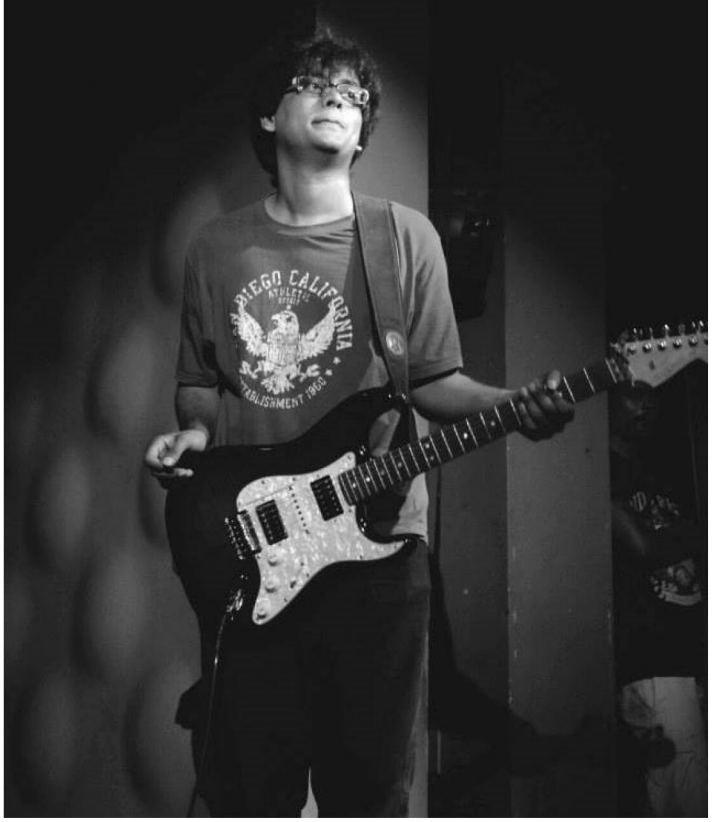
COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

Deepika Seth – *"Kahin Duur"*

New Delhi-bred and Mumbai-based singer-songwriter Deepika Seth's debut single comes in the shape of the melancholic "Kahin Duur." The track includes poignant plucked guitar parts, atmospheric soundscapes as well as Seth's elegant vocals. The song – produced by Prabahan Shakya aka Imon – opens up gradually to include drums, harmonies and horn parts too. In a statement, Seth said, "I was dealing with a very odd kind of heartbreak when this song first came to me — where there were no hard feelings at all — just unfortunate timing."

Bone Broke – *"Come Around"*

Although Mumbai-based artist Dinkar Dwivedi has had his music outfit Bone Broke around for well over a decade, today he announced the release of his debut single, the pop-leaning "Come Around." The track is draped in synths, groovy drums, funky guitar parts and Dwivedi's silky vocals. With a strong debut like this, hopefully, Bone Broke continues to release fresh tunes on the regular going forward.



Nyla Saldanha – *birthday menu*

Bengaluru/Mumbai singer-songwriter Nyla Saldanha recently released her five-track debut EP *birthday menu*. The record includes folk-pop sounds, spoken word, audio samples and more. In a statement, the artist said, "*birthday menu* started off as a fun writing experiment I came up with when I found a menu I'd made for a dinner party at home when I was five or six years old. I found that the misspelled dishes on the menu resembled a set list and tried writing to each of them. What resulted, was the most fun I've had working on music so far. This EP is very different from my usual stuff. It doesn't take itself seriously at all and has allowed me to play around with my funnier, sillier self."

MOHIT KUMAR (SETH); HRISHIKESH SINGH (BONE BROKE); COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Actor You Need to Know: Kim Woo-bin

The 33-year-old star thespian has gone through the mill, working his way to success. He withstood everything, including surviving on scant supplies, spending extended periods of time in a sauna, and fighting a fatal disease

DEBASHREE DUTTA

I GREW UNCONTROLLABLY FOND of Kim Woo-bin upon watching his drama of the same name. His commanding presence on camera may be due, in part, to his deep, piercing eyes, which are so telling in how he engages with and connects with those watching. Second, his towering stature acts as a special effect on top of his flawless virility, making him the stunning Korean hero that he is. And let's not forget about his subtle character representation, which elevates him to the level of an adept actor. Wait, I have more thoughts to add to this passage (I'm an avid Kim Woo-bin fan). If you're an attractive man, you often get cast in situations where you're expected to look great. I think Kim is fantastically atypical regarding this. He has the talent to play with that in numerous capacities, whether he's impersonating an arrogant guy or a socially inept figure.

A tall-in-the-saddle Kim Hyun-joong, in the minds of many within the profession, has been the runway model of dreams. His attractiveness aided his breakthrough into Korean entertainment in 2011 with the television mystery drama *White Christmas* and the cable sitcom *Vampire Idol* under the stage name Kim Woo-bin. The runway supermodel had therefore discovered love, excitement, and enthusiasm for acting alongside modeling, forming an everlasting tryst with the art form ever since. In 2012, he was cast in the romantic comedy-drama *A Gentleman's Dignity* and the drama adaptation of the renowned manga *To the Beautiful* You before enjoying an upsurge in fame beginning in 2013.

The year saw Kim leap with the hit drama *School 2013*. He portrayed Park Heung-soo, an unruly student who finds it difficult to integrate with his peers. Kim received accolades for his rendition of the role's complexity and realism and took home the second APAN Star Award for Best New Actor. He appeared in *The Heirs* (2013), yet another iconic drama following the popularity of *School 2013*, featuring Choi Young-do, a troubled heir battling his inner demons and the demands of his family. His performance was once again lauded by all quarters.

Later that same year, his first significant film debut happened through *Friend: The Great Legacy*, in which he played a juvenile gang member. By then, he had become widely recognized for both his outstanding physical attributes and his fierce; compelling performances—a celebrity whose sense of flair and fashion began to be emulated. Notwithstanding his burgeoning celebrity, Kim maintained a modest demeanor and sense of gratitude for his achievements, shunning the trappings of his expanding notoriety. He also persisted in working hard and honing his art—a commitment that paid off with every assignment.

His filmography displays a verified history of a career graph that is increasing and glittering with a series of consecutive

IF YOU'RE AN ATTRACTIVE MAN, YOU OFTEN GET CAST IN SITUATIONS WHERE YOU'RE EXPECTED TO LOOK GREAT. KIM IS FANTASTICALLY ATYPICAL REGARDING THIS. HE HAS THE TALENT TO PLAY WITH THAT IN NUMEROUS CAPACITIES, WHETHER HE'S IMPERSONATING AN ARROGANT GUY OR A SOCIALLY INEPT FIGURE.

PHOTO COURTESY OF HANCINEMA; NETFLIX; TVN

big-screen projects. *The Con Artists* (2014) is a heist film that feels like the ideal big-screen vehicle for an actor like Kim: it has an ambitious theft-ridden narrative with thrilling plot twists that provide high-quality entertainment, and the actor dazzles visually as Ji-hyuk, a safe-cracker living a luxurious existence by stealing schmuck and antiques. He forms an alliance with a brilliant hacker, a strategist, and others to steal a lump of money that is concealed in the Incheon Customs. The 40-minute heist's intrigue makes it worthwhile to witness. You may detect Kim Woo-bin's command of expressions by observing him intently in the film.

In Twenty (2015), a coming-of-age movie costarring Lee Jun-ho and Kang Ha-neul, he played the comedic role of a jobless player pursuing women. Following that, in the 2016 romantic melodrama *Uncontrollably Fond*, Kim played a top actor-singer, Shin Joon-young, who reconciles with his first love, Noh Eul (Bae Suzy), a documentary producer, and nailed his maiden television starring role. The drama was a rousing success, with fans appreciating Kim's nuanced depiction of an intricate man coping with a terminal illness.

Joon-young's reel life story surprisingly has some parallels to the superstar's real life. Nasopharyngeal carcinoma, an aggressive

THE ACTOR'S RE-EMERGENCE IN THE SPOTLIGHT IS A TESTAMENT TO HIS RESILIENCE. WHILE HAVING AN ACUTE MEDICAL CONDITION, HE NEVER GAVE UP ON HIS GOALS AND WAS STEADFAST IN HIS COMMITMENT TO WORK.

type of cancer that attacks the top section of the throat, was discovered in Kim Woo-bin in 2017. He went on to take a break from acting as a result to zero in on his recuperation after giving a string of immaculate performances, such as in the crime action picture *Master*, which debuted in the final quarter of 2016 and ended up becoming the 11th best-selling film of the year in South Korea. Kim featured the mind and the mastermind of the firm's president (Lee Byung-hun) in the flick concerning a smart crime investigation squad chasing a company implicated in a significant fraud case.

The actor's re-emergence in the spotlight is a testament to his resilience. While having an acute medical condition, he never gave up on his goals and was steadfast in his commitment to work. Massive admiration and support greeted his comeback. We pictured him as the supernatural Guard, manning alien prisoners in the blockbuster movie *Alienoid* (2022), whereby a portal of time opens between the

swordsman seeking the fabled divine sword at the close of the Goryeo Dynasty and those pursuing an alien trapped in a human body in recent times. Thereafter, Kim co-starred in the acclaimed omnibus television series *Our Blues* (2022), set on Jeju Island, which explores the bittersweet lives of different individuals.

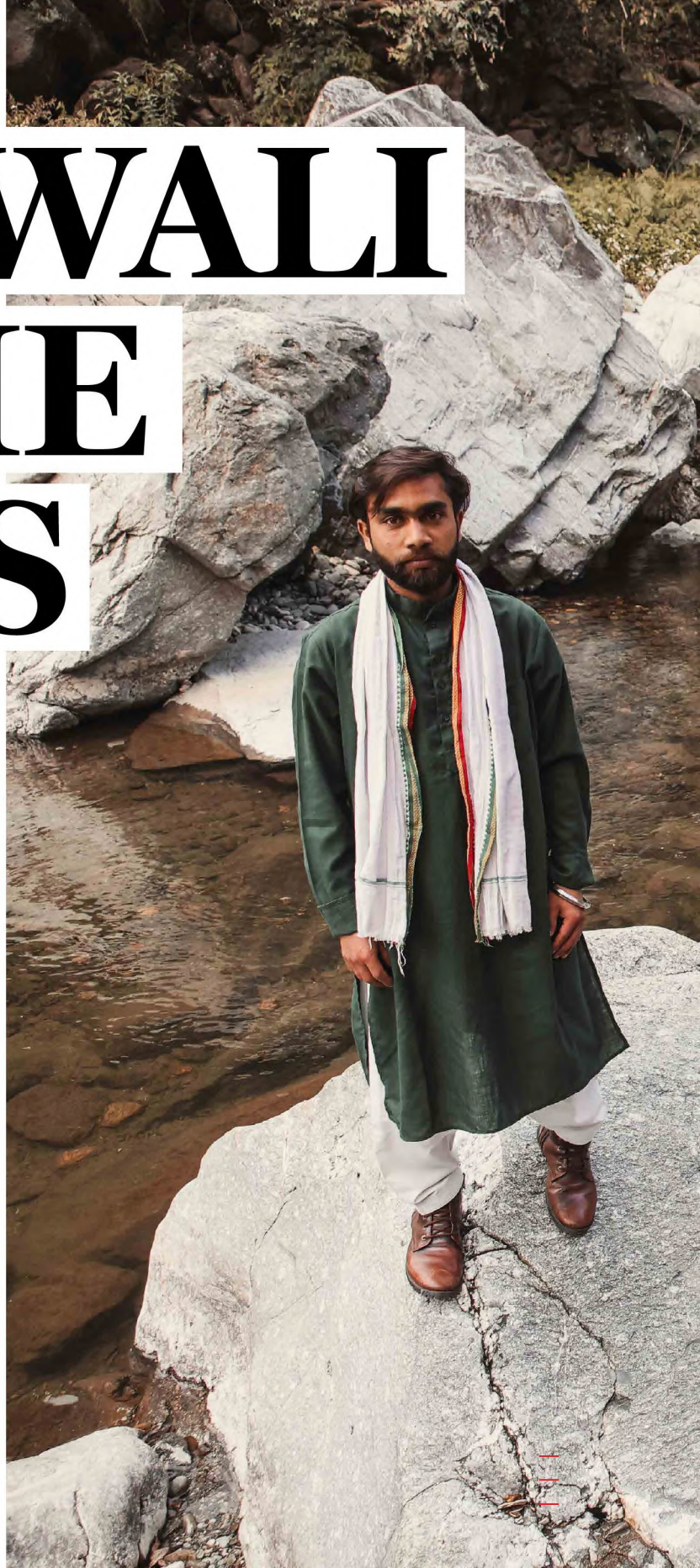
The 33-year-old star thespian has gone through the mill, working his way to success. He withstood everything, including surviving on scant supplies, spending extended periods of time in a sauna, and fighting a fatal disease. His inspiring story serves as a motivating example of the value of perseverance and courage in the face of adversity. In his words, "My favorite phrase is, 'God only gives struggles to people who can overcome it.' I saw it in a book, and it helped me out so much."

His most recent: the dismal dystopian *Black Knight*, is also an account of survivalism and human fortitude. The drama unfolds in 2071, a year of extreme air pollution that makes survival challenging without an oxygen mask. Given that a major area of the Korean Peninsula is now desert and that only a small portion of the local population exists, delivery men are thus crucial to the survival of residents there, like 5-8 (Kim), a famed delivery man with extraordinary fighting prowess. He meets Sa-wol (Kang Yoo-seok), a refugee with dreams to be a delivery driver like him. The two team up with a group of people to take on the Cheonmyeong Group, a corporate giant that now governs all of humanity. ®

QAWWALI IN THE HILLS

DEEP IN THE KUMAON HILLS IN UTTARAKHAND, A QUIET RESORT AT THE RIVERSIDE VILLAGE OF CHANFI PERIODICALLY PLAYS HOST TO AMARRASS RECORDS MUSIC TOUR, A UNIQUE THREE-DAY INTIMATE BAITHAK STYLE FESTIVAL FEATURING QAWWALI AND OTHER TRADITIONAL INDIAN MUSIC

By Narendra Kusnur



THE CHILLY BREEZE is kept at bay by a warm bonfire that dances to the harmonium and handclaps. The instrumental introduction is followed by a majestic vocal line, as 27-year-old Sarvjeet Tamta begins the Amir Khusro-penned 'Man Kunto Maula'. The Kumaoni hills are alive with the sound of qawwali.

For over two hours, Tamta's group Rehmat-e-Nusrat enchants the select audience at the Soulitude By The Riverside resort in Chanfi, a short distance from Bhimtal in Uttarakhand. In keeping with their name, most of the repertoire comprises songs popularised by late Pakistani legend Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. Over two nights, their performance is part of the new Amarrass Records Music Tour series. On one of those afternoons, the same group is rechristened HimaliMou, choosing a selection of Kumaoni folk tunes.

The tour is the brainchild of Amarrass Records, formed in 2010 by Delhi-based Ashutosh Sharma and Madison, Wisconsin-settled Ankur Malhotra. The company first gained attention when it released an album by Rajasthani folk project *The Manganiyar Seduction*, based on Roystel Abel's musico-theatrical production. They also worked with Rajasthani musicians Lakha Khan, who sings and plays Sindhi sarangi, and Padma Shri awardee Sakar Khan, who played the bowed string instrument kamaicha.

Later they backed the Barmer Boys, who even performed at Denmark's Roskilde Festival on the same day as the Rolling Stones and hip-hop duo Outkast. The label's albums include *Kesariya Balm* by Barmer Boys, and *Dubfounded* by electronic music producer Ravana and folk poet Jumme Khan. And starting in October every year the company also organizes Amarrass Nights, a monthly event devoted to traditional Indian and fusion at Sunder Nursery near Humayun's Tomb in New Delhi.

Sharma says the idea of the Amarrass Music tour came about a decade ago, when they realized there were many talented musicians who did not perform at the bigger

festivals. He adds, "Some like Sakhar Khan could not travel because of age and health issues. So, we thought of taking the audience to the artiste, in small groups, and giving them a complete experience. We wanted to begin with Rajasthan, but the pandemic happened, and things got postponed."

The idea of starting a musical tour in Uttarakhand came after Sharma met Tamta, who grew up in Almoda, Uttarakhand. Initially, he thought Tamta would do only folk music, and was thus surprised when he realized that his main focus was qawwali. He was such a fan of Nusrat that he even named his group Rehmat-e-Nusrat as a mark of respect. The group signed up with Amarrass Records in 2019 and has performed at the Amarrass Nights.

The site chosen for the music tour is the Soulitude Resort at Chanfi. It is a peaceful place perched in the middle of hills bathed in greenery, and one has to trek a kilometer on rocky terrain from the nearest vehicle-access area, making it perfect for the adventurous lot. The nearest airports are Pant Nagar and Bareilly, and if one comes by train, one has to get off at Kathgodam, at the foot of the Kumaon hills.

To add to the idyllic location, the resort runs parallel to the river Kalsa, whose constant drone is like a tanpura at a concert. In the mornings, the sound of the stream and the birds do a musical duet in the nippy air. Special masalas and pear and kiwi jams lace the Kumaoni spread cooked by the in-house chef. As darkness takes over, Tamta's charming voice makes the qawwali soar to magical heights, but only after he has personally cooked mutton and dal for the audience. If listeners like music and food, play on.

The first evening begins with the *shabd* 'Mitr Pyaare Nu', Intense ghazals are converted into handclap-backed, rhythm-filled qawwali – Mirza Ghalib's 'Har Ek Baat Pe Kehte Ho' on the opening night and Faiz Ahmed Faiz's 'Aaye Kuch Abr Kuch Sharaab Aaye' the following day. A 40-minute version of the Nusrat-popularised bhajan 'Saanson Ki Mala' is a highlight, and a snippet from the Parveen Shakir-penned 'Poora Dukh Aur Aadha Chaand' brims with poetic magnificence. One senses the faint aroma of barbecue from a distance.

The following day, the Kumaoni folk set by HimaliMou features hill songs known

as *jhoda* (an entertaining song for working classes), *niyoli* (songs of separation) and *chapeli* (tunes for dancing). The harmonium and different types of wooden flute provide the melodic accompaniment, and the dholak and hudka hand drums provide the rhythm, along with handclaps.

Kumaon is one of the divisions of Uttarakhand, and the main towns are Nainital, Bhimtal, Almoda and Bageshwar in the hills, and Haldwani, Pantnagar and Rudrapur in the plains. Though Kumaoni folk, rooted in different regions, forms the bulk of the setlist, the group also plays tunes from the Garhwal area of Uttarakhand, and Nepal, from where many have migrated for work.

Growing up in Almoda, north of Nainital, Tamta was exposed to a lot of Kumaoni and Nepali music. His father was a government teacher who loved to play harmonium as a hobby, but they didn't own the instrument at home. The youngster, however, began singing early, and won many school competitions. The turning point came when he heard a recording of Nusrat's 'Sannu Ek Pal Chain Na Aawe'. He recalls, "I must have been 14 or 15 then, and my first impulse was to watch his live performance. It came as a shock when I found out he passed away in 1997."

Tamta spent a few years learning qawwalis by Nusrat and other artists like the Wadali Brothers. "I had to learn the nuances of poetry and diction, and familiarise myself with ragas. I had to learn the true meanings of words to express them with more feeling. But my father did not buy me a harmonium. He wanted me to become an aeronautical engineer," says the singer. Leaving home at 16, he taught music and art in Pantnagar, and traveled around to meet singer Pooran Chand Wadali and Manganiyar artiste Fakira Khan. He formed Rehmat-e-Nusrat in 2014, but it took them six years to make it big on the concert scene. Besides Amarrass nights, they have performed at the Jaipur Literature Festival and Arunachal Pradesh's Ziro Music Festival.

"Rehmat-e-Nusrat's style is perfect for the music tours in Chanfi. There's a certain 'rooh' in Sarvjeet's singing that makes him special. And his knowledge of local folk music is an asset," says Sharma of Amarrass Records, who plans to make this a monthly three-days-two-nights package. The resort has seven rooms, and thus the idea is to have a compact unit of people who love music and travel, and also want a peaceful ambiance. "They can also interact with the artists, chat with them and sing along, and learn about local delicacies," he says.

Sharma, who also runs a travel agency in Delhi, plans to create awareness of the Chanfi tour through the audiences attending his shows in Delhi, besides approaching his regular customers. In October, he plans to take the tour to Rajasthan desert areas, where folk songs will be clubbed with local cuisine.

The Chanfi experience leaves us on a high. The best thing is that there are no formalities, as after the main performance, the musicians and audiences converse about assorted subjects. One doesn't realize that something's simultaneously going on in Tamta's mind, but he suddenly heads back to the harmonium and summons the tabla player. Impromptu, he sings a qawwali variant of the Noorjehan hit 'Chaandni Raatein'. The others find a sofa, joining in the backup vocals and *taalis*. It's turned cloudy by then, and there's a damp shiver in the air. But his singing makes you imagine you're under a clear moonlit sky, staring in awe at silvery trees as you hum, 'Chaandni Raatein.' R

COURTESY OF AMARRASS RECORDS

10 TRACKS TO REMEMBER TINA TURNER

THE SINGER PASSED AWAY LAST MONTH IN KUSNACHT, SWITZERLAND AT THE AGE OF 83

By Narendra Kusnur

In 1984, with music videos already ruling the way people appreciated music, the appearance of Tina Turner in the song "What's Love Got To Do With It" created waves all over. Besides the image of Tina facing the camera or walking in a leather miniskirt, people related to the lines, "Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?", and the description of love as a second-hand emotion.

The song, from the album *Private Dancer*, was one of the two big hits that people identified Tina with. The other one "The Best," often mistakenly called "Simply The Best" because of its main phrase, was actually a hit for Cyndi Lauper before Tina made it her own in 1989.

Tina, who passed away in Kusnacht, Switzerland, on May 24th, 2023 at the age of 83, had more to her than these two mega-hits. After releasing "Boxtop" in 1958 under the name Little Ann, she debuted as Tina Turner in "A Fool In Love," a duet with her partner Ike Turner, who she ultimately split from. Encompassing a cross-section of styles from rock n' roll and pop to soul and rhythm n' blues, she became one of the most sought-after live performers of her generation.

Born Anne Mae Bullock, Tina was also known for embracing Buddhism. Musically, she has built up a huge catalog over the years. Here, we chronologically look at 10 gems released by her.

"A FOOL IN LOVE" *(1960)*

Written by Ike Turner, this 1960 release was one of the first rhythm n' blues songs to become a mega-selling pop hit. It was also Tina's first professional release as lead singer though she had recorded for Ike and his band as backup vocalist since 1958. Tina's distinct voice attracted immediate attention, and the lines, "You're just a fool, you know you're in love" became a fan favorite.

"RIVER DEEP - MOUNTAIN HIGH" *(1966)*

It was produced by Phil Spector, who had seen the Ike & Tina Turner Revue at a California club. He wanted to use Tina's voice for the song but Ike agreed only on the condition that they were given joint credit. The song used a rag doll as a theme, and the musicians included Leon Russell on keyboards and Glen Campbell on guitar. Later versions by the Animals and Deep Purple increased its popularity. The song was inducted into the Grammy Hall Of Fame in 1999.

"PROUD MARY" *(1971)*

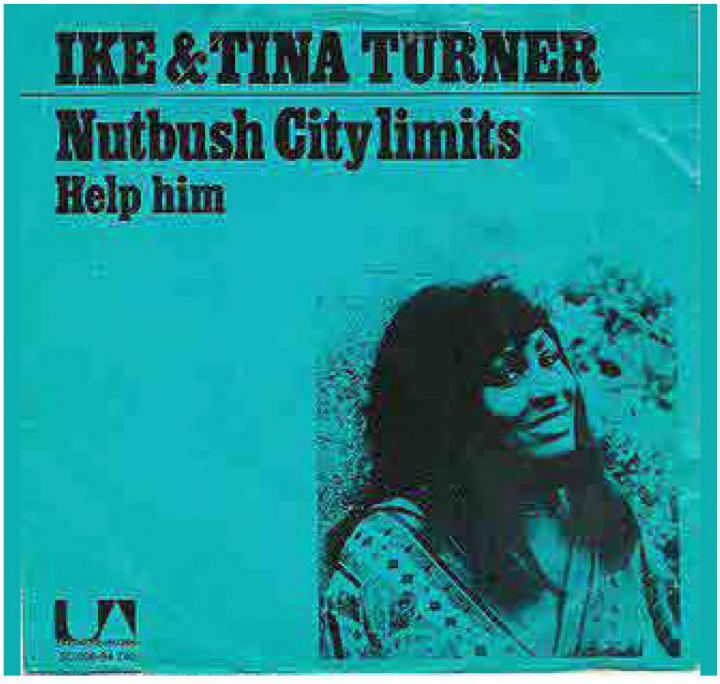
Written by John Fogerty of Creedence Clearwater Revival, "Proud Mary" was successfully covered by Elvis Presley and Ike & Tina Turner. At that time, Tina was the victim of an abusive relationship, and the song symbolized freedom. Starting slowly but suddenly getting into a funk-driven sound, It became a symbol of her live act. It also won Tina her first Grammy, for Best R&B Performance by a Duo Or Group With Vocal.

"ACID QUEEN" *(1975)*

One normally identifies this song with the version written by Pete Townshend of the Who, and later used in the rock opera Tommy, in which Tina starred as the "*Acid Queen*," appearing and singing in a scene-stealing cameo. Tina also had her own version in the album Acid Queen, where she also sang the Rolling Stones hit "Under My Thumb" and Led Zeppelin's "Whole Lotta Love." It was the last album Ike and Tina released as a duo.

"NUTBUSH CITY LIMITS" *(1973)*

This was a semi-autobiographical song written by Tina as a tribute to her rural hometown of Nutbush, Tennessee. None of the musicians were given credit though it is rumored that Marc Bolan of T-Rex played guitar. The raw energy of Tina's voice gave the song everlasting appeal. It achieved cult status in Australia, thanks to a line dance created during the 1970s disco era, and which recently became a TikTok sensation.



"WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT" *(1984)*

Writers Graham Lyle and Terry Britten had offered this song to other singers including Cliff Richard and Donna Summer, who both didn't record it. Of course, it was destined to be Tina Turner's biggest hit, making it her first and only Billboard Hot 100 single. The song won three Grammys in 1985 – Record Of The Year, Song Of The Year and Best Female Pop Vocal Performance. The music video, featuring Tina in a leather miniskirt, became hugely popular. The song was from the album *Private Dancer*, whose title song written by Mark Knopfler was also a hit.

"WE DON'T NEED ANOTHER HERO" *(1985)*

Also written by Lyle and Britten, it was featured in the film *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*, starring Mel Gibson and Tina. The lines were, "We don't need another hero, we don't need to know the way home, all we need is life beyond Thunderdome". The music video featured Tina in a chain mail gown, like her character Aunty Entity. Saxophonist Timmy Capello and a children's choir made appearances. The song was recently in the news following the release of a cover by Swedish band Ghost.

"THE BEST" *(1989)*

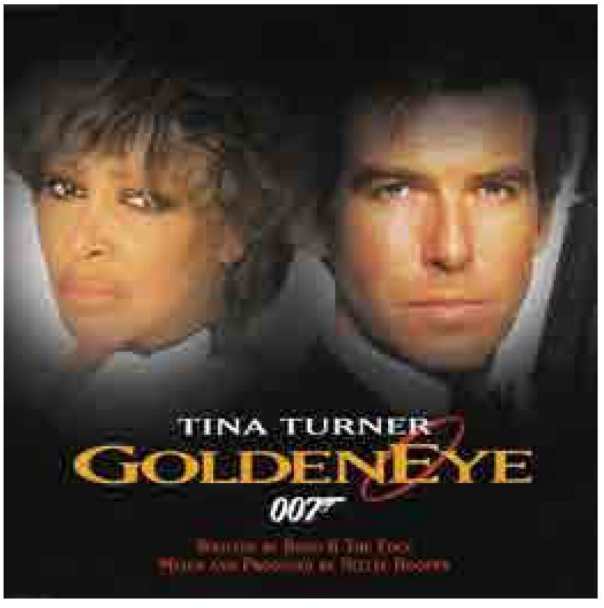
Writers Holly Knight and Mike Chapman first offered the song to Paul Young, who rejected it. Bonnie Tyler was the first to record it, achieving commercial success. Tina then recorded it in her own way, after requesting the writers for a few changes. She released it in the 1989 album *Foreign Affairs*, and Tyler admitted that Tina did "a much better job than I did." The song has since been identified with Tina's version.

"I DON'T WANNA FIGHT" *(1993)*

This song has an interesting story. It was written by British singer Lulu, her brother Billy Lawrie and Steve DuBerry. They offered it to singer Sade, who passed it on to Tina. The song was used in the Tina biopic *What's Love Got To Do With It*, starring Angela Bassett as the singer. The lines, "I don't care who's wrong or right, I don't really want to fight no more" was also interpreted as a reflection of Tina's state of mind at that point. It was her last single to chart in the top 10 of the Billboard Hot 100.

"GOLDENEYE" *(1995)*

The song was composed for the James Bond film soundtrack by Irish musicians Bono and The Edge. It was first offered to Depeche Mode, but they were busy touring, giving Tina the prestigious opportunity of singing a 007 theme song. The song had the lines, "GoldenEye I found his weakness, GoldenEye he'll do what I please, GoldenEye no time for sweetness, but a bitter kiss will bring him to his knees." The music video was directed by Jake Scott. The song was also used in Turner's album Wildest Dreams.



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Reviews

Music

ARLO PARKS' VULNERABLE ECSTASY

A soulful pop prodigy lets us into her world on her excellent second album

By MAURA JOHNSTON

Arlo Parks
My Soft Machine
TRANSGRESSIVE

On first LISTEN, the second album from London singer-songwriter Arlo Parks sounds like something to luxuriate in; Parks sings and lays down poetry over plush textures and simmering beats. But a closer listen reveals that these pillowy structures are, in fact, cushions against the blows of modern life — bulwarks that keep Parks' self, the "soft machine" referenced in the album title, moving without cutting herself off or suffering too much long-term damage.

Parks is a pop prodigy; she got noticed by a management company as a teen, and won the 2021 Mercury Prize with her debut album, *Collapsed in Sunbeams*, which came out when she was months away from turning 21. That album's blend of bedroom- ➔

ILLUSTRATION BY
Mercedes deBellard

MERCEDES DEBELLARD, COURTESY OF FOLIO ART

ARLO PARKS

pop sensibilities and intricately detailed lyrics felt very in tune with the homespun vibes of the early pandemic, even as the experiences described by Parks' supple, soothing voice possessed a depth that indicated boundless curiosity.

My Soft Machine expands that sonic palette while also digging in deeper emotionally — even when Parks is describing the ways in which she tries to numb-out. "I wish I was bruiseless," she murmurs on the album's dreamy opener, ruing her own lost innocence while regretting her powerlessness against shielding others from malevolent forces, including all the complex, not-always-positive feelings tied up in the word "love."

Parks has a skill for inviting listeners not only into her mind, but also into her immediate environment, and the effects bring her racing emotions right to the forefront. The gently groove-forward "Blades" places Parks' longing for an ex-intimate amid a party outfitted with totems of the good life — Diptyque scents, tequila cocktails — that only make the "regret ... flowering inside me while I'm scooping ice" hit harder. "Purple Phase" is a rain-slicked chronicle of seeing a friend in crisis, Parks' asides about the possibility of her depressed companion getting better — "I just want to see her iridescent charming cats down from trees," she exclaims in a singsong voice — contrasting sharply with the images of her falling into depression.

That talent extends to Parks' cheerier moments, too. The grunge-soul love song "Devotion" explodes into a chunky riff at its climax, its lyrical references to Deftones and Kim Deal becoming alive in its 2023 vision of the alt-rock era's poppiest peaks. "Impurities" is a sun-dappled love song where cascades of synth wash over a smoothly sauntering beat; Parks is fully enthralled with the idea of being seen as a full human: "I radiate like a star ... when you embrace all my impurities," she trills on the chorus, secure enough in herself to be OK with any flaws her lover might have. "Don't hide the bruise, I know it's hard to be alive sometimes."

It's the sound of an artist figuring out her place in the world, one where she can feel pure joy while bracing herself and her loved ones against its slings and arrows.

JASON ISBELL HITS A NEW PEAK

The Americana icon offers hard truths and deep healing on his ninth album By WILL HERMES

In hbo's Jason Isbell documentary, he and fellow singer-songwriter Amanda Shires seem to court marital disaster debating the best word for a lyric (spoiler: their union survives). Writing is high stakes for Isbell. "If I was makin' people dance, I wouldn't sit there and waste my time," he says, laughing cautiously. "But they are not out there dancin' — I gotta get those prepositions right."

HEAR THIS

Jason Isbell
Weathervanes
SOUTHEASTERN

He does on *Weathervanes*, his brutally beautiful ninth studio album. Its songs tremble with anger, desperation, and fear; characters wrestle regret and unhealthy appetites, struggling to cut losses in the wake of bad choices and cascading consequences. Isbell's stories glint with memoir and headlines as they put human faces on head-count epidemics: mass shootings, opioid addiction, the coronavirus. Even the love songs are bruised and weary, chilled by cold truth. Inextricable from all this is the 400 Unit, as essential here as Crazy Horse or the Heartbreakers to Neil Young's or Tom Petty's great moments. As a group document, Shires and her fiddle included, it's Isbell's strongest album to date.

What's crazy is how, in these grim times, this is effectively feel-good music. In "Death Wish," the seductive slow-burn single about a hellbent partner, Isbell observes, "It takes a whole lotta medicine to feel like a little kid." Have the snares and lures of addiction — a topic Isbell knows well — ever been nailed so precisely? The balancing act between light and dark continues on "King of Oklahoma," where a hardscrabble dude with a habit to feed plans a scrap-metal heist and a prescription forgery after treatment for an apparent workplace injury leaves him with little more than "a pocket full of pills." The pretty "Cast Iron Skillet" builds its chilling narrative in forensic snapshots: flowers on a grave, a brutal stabbing, a boyfriend "with smiling eyes and dark skin," an "old man at the Quickstop/Lying to the county cops."

Isbell has an activist streak — he was quick to call Morgan Wallen on his racially insensitive bullshit — and in song, Isbell does didactic well. His 2017 "White Man's World" deserves a place in Florida's high school curriculum (shout-out to Ron DeSantis). Ditto *Weathervanes*' "Save the World," which addresses school shootings via collateral trauma. But the strongest songs here have the fewest answers. "Miles" shows how family dysfunction happens with the best of intentions, as the 400 Unit flash their classic-rock bona fides, with the guitars echoing both latter-day Beatles and Neil Young's tender murder ballad "Down by the River." The nostalgic prettiness might strike some as a Band-Aid on a bullet hole. But you learn to take your healing where you can get it.

BREAKING

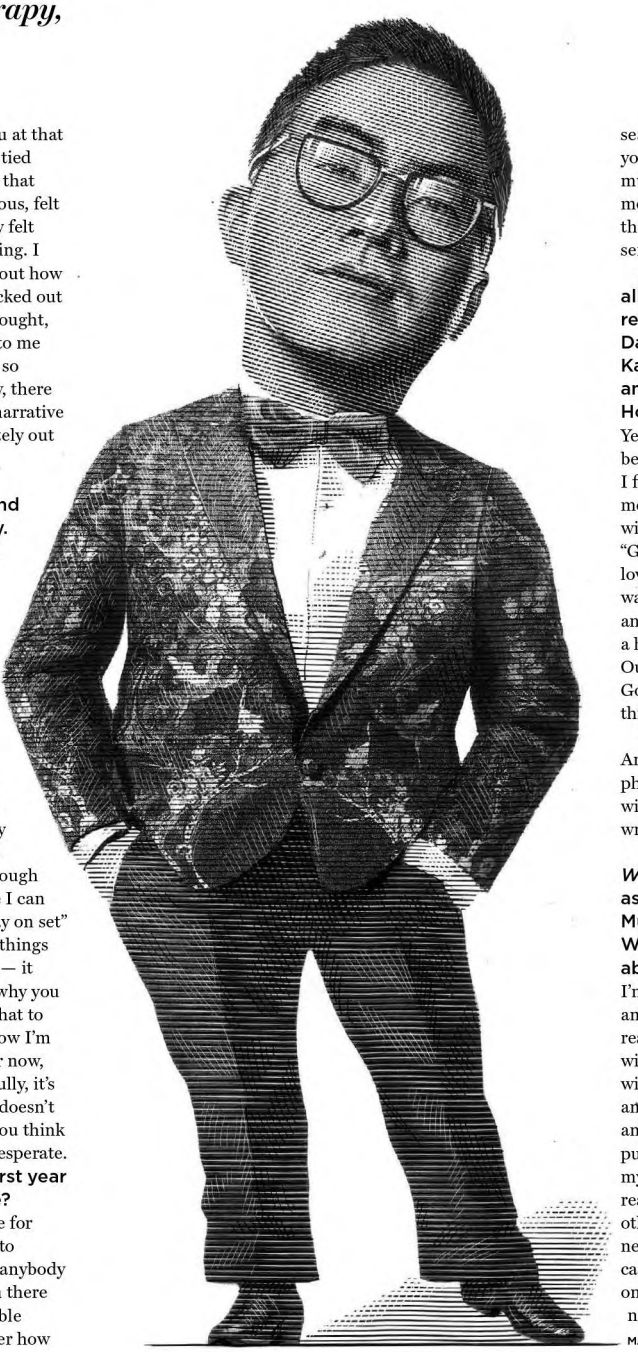
Kara Jackson's Essential Folk Therapy

CHICAGO-AREA singer-songwriter Kara Jackson is a former National Youth Poet Laureate who blends country folk and Seventies chamber pop on her adventurous full-length debut, *Why Does the Earth Give Us People to Love?* Jackson's writing is both immaculately crafted (listen to the way she plays with elongated syllables and repetition at the end of "dickhead blues") and deeply funny: "Every man thinks I'm his fucking mother," she sings seconds later, on "therapy." With its series of five-minute-plus songs, Jackson's LP is the most daring singer-songwriter statement you'll hear this year. JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

FROM TOP: DANNY CLINCH; LAWRENCE AGYEI

Bowen Yang

The 'SNL' star on conversion therapy, dating while famous, and more



The comedian is on NBC's 'Saturday Night Live' every weekend.

What does Pride Month mean to you in 2023?
Pride is that step beyond acceptance where there's some power in understanding who you are and why, and being in opposition to certain things. Culture and society afford you this clarity and this strength, and this year, especially, I feel it's very important.

What inspired you to be a comedian?
I think it came out of necessity from moving around a lot growing up. The thing I leaned on was to ingratiate myself in finding the quickest way to a laugh. With that instinct baked in, it led to me watching comedies, watching *SNL* every week. And after a certain amount of time, you convince yourself there's no other option for you.

You grew up in a strict Asian household. How did that affect your experience of being gay?
It felt very isolating. I thought, "Am I the only person feeling this way?" There wasn't a vocabulary around conversations that I think a lot of adolescents are having right now. You just had to rely on your own instincts. In my teens, it was about laying low while still finding a way to express yourself, trying to avoid the embarrassment that seems fatal to you at that age. A lot of that gets tied to queerness in a way that back then felt dangerous, felt undesirable, and truly felt like a life-or-death thing. I would hear stories about how gay kids would get kicked out of the house, and I thought, "That would happen to me if I were to come out, so let's not do that." Now, there seems to be less of a narrative that you'll be completely out on your own.

I read that you were made to attend conversion therapy. What did you take away from that?
I think ultimately that made me value and, in a literal sense, appreciate what I'm able to withstand and survive. I know that sounds kind of dramatic, but I think nowadays that's pretty important. If I can be like, "Well, I went through this thing, so I'm sure I can get through a hard day on set" — not that those two things are comparable at all — it puts a frame around why you do what you do. For that to be so closely tied to how I'm publicly, openly queer now, is meaningful. Hopefully, it's an example of how it doesn't have to end the way you think it ends when you're desperate.

What was that first year writing on *SNL* like?
It's a weekly challenge for everybody to make it to Saturday and not get anybody killed. My first season there was a pretty big crucible where it doesn't matter how seasoned you are going in, you have to negotiate how much of your own voice you mold into the show to serve the show, and how much you service your own comedy.

***SNL* has spawned all these high-profile relationships — Pete Davidson and Kim Kardashian, Colin Jost and Scarlett Johansson. How about for you?**
Yeah. I don't know if it's because of the queerness that I feel like it doesn't apply to me almost — I'm not working with the same pool. I'm like, "Good for them! I'm sure it's lovely." Look, who wouldn't want to not be on the apps and meet people? I'm having a hard time with it on my own. Outside of work I'm like, "Oh, God ... I've gotta open up this thing to meet these people?"

Are you on Raya?
Am I "on it"? It's on my phone, and I am engaging with it minimally. I have not wrung too much out of it.

You're in the upcoming *Wicked* movie musical as Elphaba and Glinda's Munchkin friend Pfannee. What can you tell us about that?
I'm in awe of the scale of it and the intimacy of it. It's really about the relationship with these two characters, with Elphaba and Glinda — and Cynthia [Erivo] and Ariana [Grande]. I'm excited to pull back and work on my own thing. I have had a really good time supporting other work that is not necessarily my own, that I can put my own imprimatur on, and that's the exciting next adventure for me.

MARLOW STERN

ILLUSTRATION BY **Mark Summers**